MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER

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The Chronic Widower

A New Mike Shayne Novelet

by Brett Halliday

All New Stories

Murder for Members Only

An Unusual Novelet by

Norman Anthony

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MIKE SHAYNE
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER 1960 VOL. 7, NO. 4

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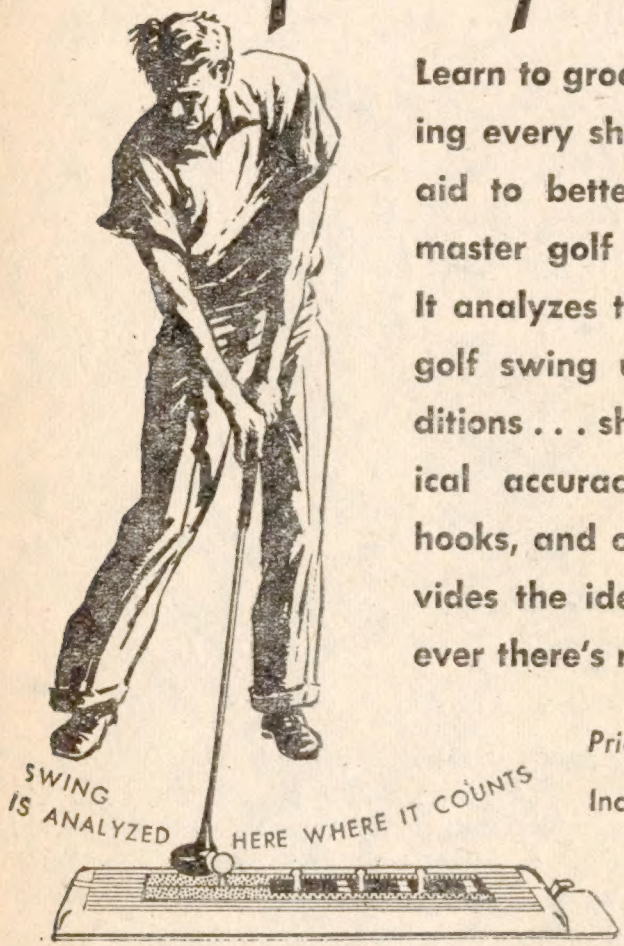

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The Chronic Widower

It was a very ugly murder. But its warped and chilling psychological aspects were just a part of the enigma Shayne had to grapple with.

by BRETT HALLIDAY

AS HELEN CAULFIELD stepped out on the porch of the big house directly across from the campus, she glanced at her watch. It was just eleven-thirty A.M. Alex and her father should be along any minute, she thought. As always she felt a pleasurable lift of anticipation at the prospect of seeing her fiance.

Then she frowned as Shirley Winters' comment of the night before recurred to her. December-June wedding indeed! Just because Alex Blake was a few years older than she was. Well, twenty-two to be exact. But his fifty-two years lent him an appearance of distinction Helen found more intriguing than youth. A trifle spinsterish in her outlook, she was always vaguely uncomfortable with men her own age.

Shirley was simply jealous be-

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A

COMPLETE NEW

MIKE SHAYNE

NOVELET

cause the romantic head of Lakeview College's history department had chosen Helen instead of her, she decided.

There were a number of envelopes in the porch mail box. Lifting them out, she turned to go back inside. She was a tall, regal-looking woman of thirty with an air of fastidiousness about her despite her casual dress and equally casual makeup. She wore a plain blue skirt, sandals and a horizontally-striped, short-sleeved blouse which clung loosely to her high, unsupported bosom. Her brown hair was clubbed carelessly back with a blue hair ribbon and her only makeup was a touch of medium-shade lipstick.

As she re-entered the house Helen riffled through the envelopes, dealing those which were obviously bills and ads into her left hand. She dropped these on a table in the hall without opening any of them and frowned at the remaining letter clutched in her right hand.

It was a plain post-office envelope without return address, directed in penciled block letters to Professor Helen Caulfield, 34 Faculty Lane, Lakeview, Florida. The postmark was local.

It looked as though it had been lettered by a child, she thought as she ripped open the envelope and withdrew the single folded sheet within.

There was no salutation and no signature to the brief message. It, too, was penciled in block letters. It read:

> DID YOU KNOW YOUR PRINCE CHARMING POISONED HIS TWO PREVIOUS WIVES? DO YOU WANT TO BE THE THIRD CORPSE?

For a long time she stared at the paper with no emotion except shock. Then anger began to build in her. Anger at the vicious, underhanded nature of the message. How could anyone be so deliberately cruel, she wondered?

Then her anger gave way to a chilling thought. Anyone capable of sending her such a missive would be equally capable of mailing poisonous notes to others. And in the tightly-knit social group of a college community in a small town, a rumor as sensational as the accusation contained in the anonymous note would sweep the campus within hours.

Another thought barely began to enter her mind when she stamped it out again. This thought was in the form of a question: how *did* the two previous wives of Professor Alexander Blake, PhD, LLD, die?

The clock in the front room chimed the quarter hour. Startled, she glanced at her watch and saw it was a quarter of noon. Alex and her father would walk in before she had cocktails made. Hurrying into the kitchen, she dumped ice

into a cocktail mixer and was measuring out gin and vermouth when she heard her father's car turn into the driveway. She carried the tray of drinks into the cypress-paneled livingroom just as the two men entered the front door.

Dr. Alfred Caulfield, head of Lakeview College's English department, and Dr. Alexander Blake, head of its history department, were somewhat similar in appearance. Both were tall, lean, distinguished-looking men with full heads of graying hair. Both were physically well-preserved, with flat waistlines and smooth, unwrinkled complexions. They were even dressed similarly at the moment, in conservatively-colored sport shirts, slacks and golfing shoes. They were also close in age, Helen's father being a bare four years older.

But there the resemblance ended. Alfred Caulfield wore a reserved, ponderous dignity as though it were a pedagogical gown. His features, while kindly, were slow to smile and his movements invariably deliberate.

There was none of this reserve in Alex Blake. Though of dignified bearing, he radiated personality and good humor. He was not handsome, yet his smile suggested such sincerity, such relish of life and living, he achieved a sort of near beauty in a thoroughly masculine manner.

Alfred Caulfield carefully stood a bag of golf clubs in a corner and said, "Ah, martinis. What will I do for service like this after you marry this scoundrel, Helen?"

Alex Blake cupped Helen's face in his palms and lightly kissed the end of her nose. "Hello, Perfect," he said.

Helen smiled at both of them, her anger and agitation over the anonymous note instantly swept away by the spell of her fiance's personality.

As they sampled their drinks, Caulfield asked, "What's for lunch, Helen?"

"Lobster salad, potato chips, iced tea. It's too hot for anything warm. It's all ready whenever you are."

Her father beamed. "See what I mean, Alex? How am I ever going to replace my daughter with a mere housekeeper? I not only don't have to pay her, she contributes to the general upkeep from the meager stipend she earns slaving in your history department. I'm not sure that, for selfish reasons, I ought not to withdraw my blessing to this match."

For once Alex Blake failed to respond to his friend's rather heavy humor with a smile. Instead he frowned.

"You may have a better reason than that to withdraw it, Alfred," he said with unaccustomed seriousness. "I didn't mention it on the golf course, because I thought

all three of us ought to be together when I did. But I got a rather nasty communication through the mail yesterday."

From the breast pocket of his sport shirt he withdrew a folded envelope. As he smoothed out the creases, Helen saw with a sinking feeling in her stomach that it was a plain post-office envelope, addressed in penciled block letters.

"It isn't very long," Blake said. He slipped a single sheet of paper from the envelope, unfolded it and read aloud in a faintly mocking tone, " 'You've poisoned two wives to inherit their money, Prince Charming. Why do you want a third after ten years of bachelorhood? Going broke again?"

There was dead silence when he finished reading. Caulfield stared at him with an expression of stupefaction on his face. Helen repressed an impulse to throw her arms about his neck and begin to weep.

Alex Blake smiled sardonically. "I had an experience with a poison-pen writer once before," he said. "If this one follows the same pattern, within the next couple of days Lakeview College will be divided solidly down the middle. Half the faculty and half the student body will be outraged at the accusation; the other half will be convinced I'm a murderer."

"Why do you say that?" Helen asked faintly.

"Because poison-pen writers are prolific. There's probably a dozen or more similar letters addressed to faculty members, student leaders and prominent citizens of the town in the mail right at this moment."

Caulfield, unlike his daughter, was capable of almost instant self-control in an emergency. His stupefaction was of short duration, the emotional distress following it quickly thrust into the background. He became brisk, determined, completely sure of himself.

"There's only one way to combat total viciousness," he said, regarding his prospective son-in-law steadily. "Find the culprit and expose him as quickly as possible."

Blake nodded, his lips set in tight lines. "I agree. But how? It could be a pretty large order."

"As you know, I used to teach at the University of Miami. It brought me into contact with some very interesting people," Caulfield said. "One of them was the well-known private detective, Michael Shayne. I guess I needn't even ask you if the name rings a bell."

"It does indeed," Blake said. "Do you think—"

"The quickest way to find out if he'll help us would be to phone him without delay," Caulfield said, anticipating the other's thought with a slight smile. "I know him pretty well. He'll take on a case whether the circumstances anger him or not—if he feels that a great injustice may be tied in with it

somewhere. But a poison-pen case is certain to anger him in a very immediate way. I don't think I'll have to plead with him or be particularly persuasive. I'll just phone and give him the facts."

WHEN LUCY HAMILTON informed Michael Shayne that he had a call from Lakeview, the name of the town tugged at a vague memory. He knew it was a small college town on one of the inland lakes about a hundred miles from Miami, but the past association escaped him.

Picking up his desk phone and settling back comfortably in his swivel chair, he said, "Shayne speaking."

"Mike?" a reserved voice said in his ear. "This is Alfred Caulfield."

Shayne pulled a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket. "I was trying to remember who I knew in Lakeview. I'd forgotten that's where you moved when you left Miami U. How are you, Doc?"

"Well enough physically," the professor said. "Not so well psychologically. We're having a little trouble here, Mike."

"What kind?" Shayne asked, putting his left elbow on the book of matches he fished from his pocket, to hold it firmly so that he could light one of them.

"A whispering campaign. Poison-pen letters. Think you could come up?"

"A whispering campaign against you?" Shayne asked incredulously. He knew that, years back, Dr. Alfred Caulfield had been one of the best liked professors on the Miami University campus.

"No, no, Mike. Against a friend of mine. A very good friend. In fact my future son-in-law, though it's a little difficult for me to think of Alex as a son. This thing threatens to cancel his and Helen's marriage plans."

"Why?" Shayne asked. "What are they saying about him?"

Caulfield filled in the picture briefly and concisely, keeping nothing back.

The redhead mused for a minute. "When would you want me?" he asked finally.

"As soon as possible, Mike. The wedding is only a week off, and we have to have the air cleared before then. They couldn't possibly go through with the wedding with this thing hanging fire. When could you make it?"

"This evening. I could leave after lunch."

"Fine," Caulfield said in a relieved tone. "It's Thirty-four Faculty Lane, right across from the campus. I'll expect you this evening, then."

Shayne was frowning when he walked out into the anteroom a few moments later.

"Who was it, Michael?" Lucy asked.

The redhead tugged at his left

earlobe. "My old friend, Doc Caulfield. Remember the English professor who used to do handwriting analysis for us out at Miami U.? He's up at Lakeview now. He has a poison-pen problem."

Lucy's nice features wrinkled in distaste. "Those people are usually psychotic, aren't they, Michael? What sort of vicious slander is she spreading around?"

Shayne gave her an interested look. "Why do you say 'she'?"

Lucy looked surprised. "Why, men seldom write poison-pen letters, Michael. That's usually a woman's trick."

Shayne grinned at her. "You don't have a very high opinion of your own sex, angel."

"We can be pretty sneaky," Lucy admitted. "Most poisonings are by women, you know. Men are usually more direct. They shoot or stab their victims, or hit them over the head."

"Where did you get this vast knowledge of criminal psychology?" the redhead asked amusedly.

"Just from being your secretary, Michael. And especially being a woman. And then a girl learns a lot around a detective agency—after a while," Lucy said, and grinned.

Running his fingers lightly through her hair, Shayne said, "You're wonderful, angel—just wonderful."

II

WHEN MICHAEL SHAYNE arrived in Lakeview he went directly to a downtown restaurant and cocktail bar called *The Rendezvous.* The name and location of the place were familiar to him, for in his brief phone conversation with Caulfield he had been given the name of the best restaurant in town, which happened also to be the one most frequented by both faculty members and students. He had his own reason for eliciting such information without appearing to do so, and was congratulating himself on his success in that respect when his complacency was rudely shattered by an unexpected development.

He had wanted a few moments to look around, to get the feel of the town and people, to maintain a quiet anonymity as an observant listener. But he no sooner entered the restaurant and started toward the bar when a blonde with a pleasant, finely chiseled face and a nicely rounded form which the conservative cut of her clothes couldn't quite manage to hide saw and recognized him. There could be no mistaking her recognition of him, for she waved to him, smiled warmly, and invited him to sit next to her and her escort at the bar.

Her escort was a powerfully built man of about thirty-five with dark hair and eyes and rather

scholarly, not unhandsome features. He, too, smiled and gestured toward the empty stool at his companion's side, but was content to let the woman take care of the introductions.

"You're Michael Shayne, aren't you?" the woman said. "I'm Shirley Winters, a friend of Helen Caulfield's. And this is Emmet Turner. I'd have recognized you anywhere. I've seen your pictures in the Miami papers. I used to visit Helen, you see, when her father taught at Miami University."

Her voice took on a slightly amused, challenging tone. "You're here because of those poison-pen letters, aren't you? Helen told me all about it."

Shayne started to reply, then thought better of it. He was just as well satisfied to have her go on talking, and he shrewdly suspected that she would take his silence for encouragement.

She did. Her voice became almost tremulous as she went on eagerly: "You came to the right place. This is the only really good restaurant in town and the college crowd comes here regularly. If it's local gossip and tongue-wagging you're interested in—"

"It is," Shayne conceded with a smile. He was about to confide in her more fully, because he rather liked her despite her expansiveness when behind him he heard a voice say, "How do we know he's not a Bluebeard, like the letters say? After all, he has had two wives die under mysterious circumstances."

The detective turned sidewise on his stool to glance behind him. Four college youths of about twenty or twenty-one, probably all seniors, sat at a table only a few feet from the bar. Empty plates lay before them and they were having cigarettes over coffee. The one who had spoken was a slim, intent-looking boy with curly black hair which tumbled over a pale, scholarly forehead.

One of his companions said in an amused tone, "I think you've got a grudge against Dr. Blake because you've got a crush on teacher."

George flushed. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Sure he has," one of the other lads said. She's too old for you, George. She's almost as much older than you as Doc Blake is older than Helen Caulfield."

"Only nine years," George said quickly. "He has twenty-two on her." Then, as his companions grinned delightedly at this unconscious admission that the age difference had been on his mind, his flush deepened to a dull red.

The fourth boy, happening to glance up and catch Shayne's gaze on them, said something to the others in a low voice. Immediately they all dropped their voice levels. Shayne swung back to face the bar

and took another sip of cognac.

Shirley Winters said sardonically, "Alex Blake and his former wives seems to be the only subject of conversation in town these days."

Shayne nodded. "You were right about the tongue-wagging," he said.

The powerfully-built man with her leaned across her and said to Shayne, "Contrary to the popular adage, where there's smoke, there isn't necessarily fire. Blake is a thoroughly honorable man. But that doesn't alter the fact that he's far too old for Helen Caulfield."

Shirley Winters said: "He doesn't know where you fit into the picture, Emmet. He's not from here." Her tone became a trifle mocking. "Emmet disapproves of Alex Blake because he wanted Alex's fiancee for himself."

Emmet Turner said shortly, "At least I pick them near my own age. What's your excuse for being crazy about Alex?"

The blonde gave Shayne a rueful smile. "We're a fine pair. Drawn together in our mutual misery by unrequited love." She turned back to her escort. "Maybe we should settle for each other, Emmet."

Emmet smiled, said, "Not so soon after dinner, dear."

Shirley made a face at him.

The group at the table behind them rose to leave. As they filed past toward the cashier, the curly-haired George paused and stared at Shayne. Glancing sidewise at him, the redhead raised a shaggy eyebrow.

"Aren't you Mike Shayne?" the boy asked.

"Uh-huh," Shayne admitted.

"I've seen your picture in the paper often, Mr. Shayne," the boy said with enthusiasm. "I'm from Miami too. My name's George Miller." He thrust out his hand.

Agreeably Shayne gripped it. "How are you, George?"

"Just fine, sir. You just passing through?"

"I'll be around a few days, probably."

"Oh? Up here on a case?"

Shayne gave a noncommittal grunt.

One of George Miller's companions, waiting at the cashier's counter, called, "You going to divvy up your share, George?"

"Excuse me," Miller said. "It was sure nice to meet you, Mr. Shayne."

"I enjoyed meeting you, son," the redhead told him.

When the young man moved on, Shayne turned back to Shirley Winters. "You with the college too?" he asked.

"Just a lowly instructor of music," she told him.

The waitress came over at that moment to tell Shayne his table was ready. Tossing off the rest of his cognac, the redhead nodded goodbye to Turner and the blonde

Shirley and followed the waitress to his table.

It was nearly eight thirty when Shayne got to 34 Faculty Lane, which was an old-fashioned two-story frame building with a wide front veranda. Dr. Alfred Caulfield answered the door. He greeted Shayne with reserved enthusiasm, took the overnight bag from his hand and set it on the floor of the hall.

"Helen will show you your room later," he said. "You'll need a drink after your drive. And some dinner."

The redhead told him he had already had dinner, but could use the drink. Dr. Caulfield led him into the front room, where a man and woman were seated. The man rose as they entered.

Though it had been some years since Shayne had seen her, Helen Caulfield had changed not at all. He greeted her cordially, then turned his attention to the man.

"Mike, meet Dr. Alexander Blake," Caulfield said. "Alex, Mike Shayne."

Alex Blake smiled, exposing even white teeth. The history professor was tall and distinguished looking without seeming in the least pompous. His handclasp was firm and his smile so full of sincere friendliness, Shayne found himself smiling back with immediate liking. After meeting the man, he could understand how two attractive women more than twenty years his junior could simultaneously fall in love with him.

Helen mixed them drinks, making Tom Collins' for herself and Blake, pouring brandy for her father and Shayne. After a bit of small talk concerning Shayne's drive from Miami, Dr. Caulfield got around to business.

Taking two envelopes from his pocket, he handed them to Shayne. "We discussed this on the phone, but not in complete detail," he said. "One of these came to Alex through the mail last Friday. The other came to Helen on Saturday. It's obvious from the context which is which. Since then a number of faculty members and students have shown me similar letters, and there's no telling how many others have gotten them and have been too embarrassed to mention it to me."

Shayne pulled the two messages from their envelopes and read them in silence. When he finished, he refolded them, replaced them in the envelopes and handed them back to the doctor.

Looking at Alex Blake, he asked, "Any idea what the motive behind these letters is?"

Blake shrugged. "Does madness have to have a motive? The writer's an obvious psychopath."

"Even mentally ill people have to have reasons for doing things," the redhead told him. "Maybe twisted reasons from a normal point of view, but logical to a

twisted mind. On the surface it looks as though the purpose of the letters is to wreck your marriage plans. Could they have been sent by some woman in love with you, Dr. Blake. Or by a man in love with Helen?"

Blake said dryly, "It hardly seems a purpose anyone in love would choose, mentally ill or otherwise."

"With the wedding only a week off the writer may have felt any method of stopping it was justified," Shayne said. "Love does not rule out a great capacity for cruelty."

No one said anything. Alex looked thoughtful. Helen colored slightly and stared into her glass.

Shayne said, "Do either of you know of anyone who might have a large crush on you?"

Blake gave a deprecating laugh. "I'm afraid I don't cause many women to swoon, Mr. Shayne."

Helen looked as though she were on the verge of suggesting a name, changed her mind and said almost defensively, "I'm sure no one but Alex has the slightest interest in me."

Shayne wondered if the name she had been about to suggest was that of the man he had met at the *Rendezvous*. When Blake gave her a quick look, he also wondered if the Shirley Winter's companion, Emmet Turner, had occurred to the history professor as a possibility in Helen's case. Since neither seemed to want to make any suggestions in front of the other, he decided not to push it at the moment, but later try them individually in private.

He said, "The writer suggests that you inherited money from both your former wives, Doctor. Did you?"

Helen and her father both frowned. Alex Blake said quietly, "A rather substantial sum from both. But I'm not much of a businessman. I've managed to lose most of it by bad investments."

"I see. Just what were the actual circumstances of your former wives' deaths?"

Helen stiffened in her chair. "Why are these questions necessary, Mike? We know the letters lie. All we want is for you to find out who's writing them."

Shayne said mildly, "I'm trying to narrow down possibilities. Apparently the writer is someone well acquainted with Dr. Blake's past. I want to find out how well acquainted."

Blake said, "Marcia died twenty-five years ago of food poisoning in St. Louis. Janet has been dead ten years. She died of an accidental over-dose of sleeping tablets in Miami."

Shayne's eyes narrowed. "So there's some basis for the letters' statement that they both died of poisoning. Even if you had nothing to do with the poisonings."

Helen asked in a belligerent

tone, "What do you mean by 'if'?"

Shayne waved an impatient hand. "Stop being so touchy, Helen. I haven't been retained to investigate Dr. Blake, and I don't personally care whether he poisoned his wives or not. I'm simply trying to pin down who would be familiar with the circumstances of those deaths."

He turned back to Blake. "Is it generally known around here that both your wives died of poisoning, and that you inherited money from them?"

Blake said slowly, "Not around here. I've only been here four years. Dr. Caulfield and I moved here from Miami University at the same time."

Alfred Caulfield said wearily, "I didn't know it. I knew about Janet, of course, because Alex and I were colleagues at Miami University at the time. But I didn't even know Alex when his first wife died."

Blake said in the same slow voice, "I suppose most people in Lakeview knew I was twice a widower. I've never concealed the fact. And I suppose many knew the circumstances of Janet's death. There was a public inquest, and many of our students come from Miami. But I don't see how anyone could know the circumstances of Marcia's death in St. Louis. I may have mentioned that she died there, but until tonight I've never discussed with a single person either in Miami or here the cause of her death. Not even Jane."

Shayne finished his brandy and stood up. "Then our first move is to try to find someone with a St. Louis connection," he said briskly. "But it'll keep until tomorrow. I had a long drive and would just as soon turn in early."

Helen Caulfield stood up too. "I'll show you to your room, Mike," she said.

III

AT SEVEN THIRTY in the morning Shayne awakened to find Dr. Alfred Caulfield sitting on the edge of his bed fully dressed. The redhead stretched, lifted a cigarette from his bedside stand, lighted it and took a deep puff.

Then he said, "Morning, Doc."

The professor looked as though he hadn't slept very well. Without looking at Shayne he said, "Breakfast won't be for a half hour, Mike, but I wanted to talk to you. I did a lot of thinking last night."

Shayne flicked ashes from his cigarette, put one arm behind his head and said nothing.

"Understand, Alex Blake is one of my best friends," Caulfield went on. "We've been intimate for nearly fifteen years. But Helen means more to me than any friend."

Shayne still said nothing.

"I never knew until last night

that Alex's first wife died of food poisoning."

Shayne took another drag from his cigarette. Dr. Caulfield said crossly, "You aren't being very helpful, Mike."

"I'm listening," the redhead said.

"This is embarrassing," the professor complained. "All my life I've followed the principle of having complete faith in my friends. And now—"

When his voice trailed off, Shayne said wearily, "Now you want me to find out whether or not Blake actually did poison his wives."

"I have to know, Mike," Caulfield said. "If Helen wasn't involved, I'd simply accept Alex on faith. But I can't let her marry a man who might be a murderer."

Shayne punched out his cigarette, swung out of bed and padded to the bathroom on bare feet. The professor followed as far as the door and watched him run water for shaving.

Shayne said quietly, "I came here to trace down a poison-pen writer. A difficult enough undertaking in most cases. Now you want me to investigate a ten-year-old death and a twenty-five-year-old death. And the second death took place halfway across the country."

"I know it's a tough proposition, Mike," Caulfield said apologetically. "But I have to know. Tackle the two deaths first and let the poison-pen thing ride. Get me a definite answer about Alex's former wives, and you can name your own fee."

"I always name my own fee anyway," Shayne said bleakly. He began to lather his face. After a moment he said in a kinder tone, "I'll take it under one condition, Doc."

"What's that?"

"I'm going to need all the cooperation I can get, including Alex Blake's. I'll have to know the exact dates of the deaths, attending doctors and what hospitals the two women died in—if they died in hospitals. I can't ask him detailed questions like that without some explanation. So the only way I'll take the case is with your permission to tell Blake what I'm doing."

Caulfield looked upset. "It might end our friendship, Mike. Or, worse, turn Helen against me."

Shayne drew his razor carefully down one cheek. "I'm afraid you'll have to take that chance. I can't touch it otherwise."

The professor was silent for a long time. Finally he said in a subdued tone, "All right, Mike. You have my permission."

An hour later, after a substantial breakfast, Shayne, Dr. Caulfield and Helen crossed the street together to the college campus. They left Caulfield at the adminis-

tration building and Helen led the redhead on to the Social Sciences building.

Inside she pointed down the hall and said, "Alex's office is one-fourteen, Mike. He doesn't have a nine o'clock class, so he should be there now. I do and I have some notes to go over, so I'll have to scoot."

"All right," Shayne said. "Thanks."

Helen moved rapidly away and entered a classroom door. Shayne turned the other way and began checking room numbers.

The door to 114 was open. The room was a small office with a desk, books lining the walls, a huge globe of the world on a stand and a couple of guest chairs. The scholarly-looking young man who had introduced himself to Shayne as George Miller at the *Rendezvous* the previous night sat in one of the chairs. He looked at Shayne in surprise.

"Morning, Mr. Shayne," he said. "Looking for Dr. Blake?"

Shayne admitted he was.

"He's around somewhere, or his office wouldn't be unlocked. I had an eight-thirty conference arranged with him, so he should be along any minute." Then he looked thoughtful. "Are you in Lakeview about those letters?" he ventured.

Shayne took the other guest chair. "I might be. What's your opinion of them?"

Before the boy could answer, the blonde Shirley Winters stuck her head in the door. "Isn't Dr. Blake here yet?" she asked young Miller. Then her eyes widened when she saw Shayne. "Good morning," she said. "I didn't expect to find you here."

Shayne said, "I thought you were in the music department."

Shirley grinned. "Music is the campus orphan. We don't have our own building. We make do with the basement of the Social Sciences building." She moved on.

After a moment George Miller said, "In answer to your previous question, I have a kind of cock-eyed theory."

Shayne raised shaggy eyebrows inquiringly.

"You seem to know Miss Winters," Miller said.

"Just barely."

"It's common campus gossip that she's in love with old Doc Blake."

"Oh?" Shayne said. "Your theory is that she wrote the letters?"

The boy looked surprised. "Of course not. She's too nice a woman. I think he did."

Shayne looked puzzled. "He?"

"Doc Blake himself. When Miss Winters isn't up on this floor hanging around him, he's downstairs hanging around her. I think he's as crazy about her as she is about him."

Shayne looked at him for a few moments. Finally he said, "Why?"

"Why would he write letters slandering himself? It's simple. He wants to get out of his engagement to Miss Caulfield. But he doesn't know how. He hasn't got the courage to just tell her. So he creates a situation where he can nobly withdraw for her own good."

Shayne examined Miller for a while longer. Then he said, "You don't like Dr. Blake much, do you?"

"Not much," Miller agreed. "He's a fine history teacher, but I think he's an old goat where women are concerned. What do you think of my theory?"

"The same thing you do. It's cockeyed."

The youth shrugged. Glancing at a wall clock, he said with a frown, "Dr. Blake should have been here long ago."

"Let's take a look in his classroom," Shayne said.

Miller nodded and preceded the detective across the hall and down two doors. He tried the knob, but the door was locked.

"Funny," Miller said puzzledly. "If he hadn't gotten here yet, his office wouldn't have been open."

An elderly man in overalls rounded a corner of the hall pushing a sweeper's broom before him. Miller called, "Have you seen Dr. Blake, Jones?"

The janitor continued pushing the broom until he neared them, then leaned it against the wall. "Ain't he in his classroom?"

"Door's locked," Miller said.

"Funny. I seen him and Mr. Turner go in there real early. Around eight, maybe. You look in his office?"

Miller said, "I've been waiting in his office since eight thirty. I had a conference scheduled."

The janitor pulled out a turnip-sized watch on a piece of chalk-line. "After nine. Let's take a look."

Putting the watch away, he produced a ring of keys, sorted them over and inserted one in the lock. He pushed the door open and went in. Shayne and young Miller trailed after him.

Dr. Alex Blake was seated at the instructor's desk at the front of the empty classroom. His head was pillowed on his arms. The slim, metallic handle of what looked like a letter opener protruded from high on the left side of his back. The wound had bled profusely.

Miller and the janitor came to an abrupt halt. Shayne crossed the room in three swift strides and felt for the professor's pulse. After a few moments he dropped the limp wrist.

"Dead," he announced tersely.

George Miller said in a wondering tone, "But how? The door was locked."

Moving to the door, Shayne examined the lock. "Spring lock," he said. "The killer merely set it and pulled the door closed when

he left." He gestured to the other two. "Out."

Obediently they both filed into the hall. They stared at Shayne with shocked faces. The redhead clicked the door shut again.

He turned to the janitor. "Get to a phone and call the police," he ordered.

As the man hurried away, Shayne said to Miller, "He mentioned a Mr. Turner going into the classroom with Dr. Blake. Would that be Emmet Turner?"

Miller nodded dumbly.

"Know where to find him?"

"Over in the gym, I imagine."

"Then scoot over and get him. Don't tell him about the murder. But get him over here fast. Whatever he's doing, break it up, even if he's running a class."

"Yes, sir," Miller said in a scared voice.

He moved toward the main door of the building at a pace which was nearly a run.

IV

MICHAEL SHAYNE remained in front of the classroom door. With classes now in session, the hall was deserted. In a few moments the elderly janitor returned.

"I called Tom," he said. "He'll be right over, soon as he phones the sheriff's office."

"Who's Tom?" Shayne inquired.

The janitor seemed surprised that everyone didn't know Tom. "The constable. Tom Snyder."

"Is he your entire police force?" Shayne asked.

"Sure. Unless you count the school night watchman. With a fifteen hundred population, what would we need more cops for?"

This should be lovely, Shayne thought. A one-man police force. But at least he apparently had sense enough to inform the sheriff's office.

George Miller and the muscular Emmet Turner came in the front entrance. The athletic director was wearing gym shoes, slacks and a sweat shirt.

Shayne said to the janitor, "You plant yourself in front of this door until the sheriff's men get here, Jones. Don't let anyone in that room."

"Yes, sir," the old man said.

The redhead moved to meet Miller and Turner. The latter said in an annoyed voice, "What's so important, Mr. Shayne? You interrupted an athletic planning session with my staff."

"Tough," Shayne said. "Let's go in here."

He steered Turner into Dr. Blake's office and shut the door in young George Miller's face. Turner stared at Shayne with a mixture of puzzlement and belligerence.

Shayne said, "According to the janitor, you and Dr. Blake went into his classroom together about eight A.M. That right?"

Turner nodded. "About then. Why?"

"What did you want with him?"

Turner frowned. "Why would that be any of your business?"

"I was hired to track down this poison-pen writer," Shayne said. "I wasn't hired by Dr. Blake, but it was with his knowledge and consent. Which makes him my client once-removed."

"So?"

"I make it my business when a client gets murdered. Even a once-removed client."

Turner went pale. After a moment of shocked adjustment he said, "Dr. Blake has been murdered?"

"Uh-huh. And you seem to be the last person who saw him."

The athletic director stared at him. "Certainly you can't think I killed him."

"You had a motive. He planned to marry your girl."

Turner opened his mouth and closed it again. Finally he managed, "You don't kill people for things like that. Not if you're civilized."

"The prisons are full of uncivilized people then," Shayne said dryly. "What were you seeing Blake about?"

"One of his students. My first-string basketball center. He's failing a course in the history of American foreign relations. If his grade isn't jacked up, he'll be ineligible to play basketball. I wanted to arrange with Blake for some special tutoring."

"Did you arrange it?"

"Blake said he'd talk to the boy and offer to hold daily conferences with him for a while. We parted quite amicably, and he was certainly alive when I left."

Neither said anything for a time. Finally Shayne said, "You don't have much curiosity."

"What do you mean?"

"You haven't even asked how he was killed."

Turner gazed at him with faint belligerence. "All right. How was he?"

"Why didn't you ask before? Because you knew?"

The man's face reddened. "I don't like your insinuation, Shayne."

"I don't like your lack of curiosity, Turner. Did you kill him?"

"No. I didn't. I know nothing about it."

Shayne's gaze shifted suddenly to the opposite side of the room. Stalking to the door, he jerked it open. George Miller almost fell into the room, recovered his balance and looked embarrassed.

"Did we talk loud enough for you to hear?" Shayne inquired sarcastically.

"I was just—" Miller started to explain, then decided nothing he said was going to make Shayne believe he hadn't been eavesdropping, and subsided.

Shayne walked back out into

the hall, and after a moment Miller and Turner both trailed after him.

Jones was still standing with his back to the classroom door. The old man said in a thoughtful tone, "Mister, I been running around like a chicken with its head off, obeying your orders like you was the dean of the college, and I don't even know who you are."

Young Miller said from behind the redhead, "He's Michael Shayne, the detective."

Jones's eyes widened and he scratched his head. "Well, do tell. I guess this kind of thing is in your line, Mr. Shayne. So you go right on ordering and I'll go right on obeying."

A few minutes later a tall, reedily-built man nearly as old as the janitor came in the front door. He wore faded army khaki, an old-fashioned stiff-brimmed campaign hat, a nickel-plated badge and a gun in a holster with a buttoned-down flap. Jones introduced him to Shayne as Tom Snyder, the village constable.

The elderly constable showed no desire to view the body or ask any questions, preferring to leave the entire investigation to more experienced hands. After hearing the story, he merely said, "A deputy sheriff should be along any minute now. It's only about ten miles to the county seat."

Two sheriff's deputies arrived about fifteen minutes later, both smartly dressed in khaki shirts, whipcord breeches and brightly-polished riding boots. The senior was a stocky, gray-haired man of about fifty with heavy features and tired eyes. He said his name was Everett Spawn. His partner was a lean, narrow-featured man with a sardonic expression whose name was Andrew Thompson.

Several minutes passed before the two deputies came out of the classroom. Spawn had Jones relock the door.

Looking at Shayne, the senior deputy asked, "It occur to anyone to call a doctor?"

"He'd been dead for some time when we found him," Shayne said. "I'd guess at least a half hour."

"What's your part in this, Shayne?" Spawn asked.

"Somebody has been writing poison-pen letters about Dr. Blake," Shayne told him. "I was hired to find out who."

"By Blake?"

"By Dr. Caulfield of the English department. With Blake's knowledge and consent. Blake was engaged to marry Caulfield's daughter."

"Have you found out who was writing them?"

Shayne shook his head. "I haven't even started the investigation. I only got in last night."

George Miller put in, "I guess my theory that Dr. Blake was writing the letters himself really was cockeyed, huh, Mr. Shayne?"

Everett Spawn wanted an immediate explanation of this remark. When he got it, he seemed to agree that the theory was cockeyed. Next he had Miller, Jones and Shayne each describe the discovery of the body in turn.

When Jones mentioned seeing Dr. Blake enter the classroom with Emmet Turner about eight A.M., the senior deputy questioned Turner closely about this and got the same explanation the man had given Shayne. Finally Spawn turned back to Shayne and listened attentively while the redhead went over again everything he knew about the case.

By this time the first-hour class was over. Spawn hurried everyone into Dr. Blake's office to escape the curious eyes of students trooping along the halls to their next classes. When the sound of movement in the hall died away, he sent Thompson to round up Dr. Caulfield, Helen Caulfield and Shirley Winters, and sent Jones off to inform the school authorities of the murder and request the school physician to come over and examine the body.

Shayne said, "Do you need me any more?"

"No, I guess not," Spawn said. "Where you staying?"

"With Dr. Caulfield. Thirty-four Faculty Lane."

The senior deputy nodded. "You got anything to add to your story?"

The detective shook his head. "Okay. We'll look you up if we want a formal statement."

As he stepped from the office Shayne saw Shirley Winters hurrying down the hall in his direction. Throwing her a casual wave, he turned in the other direction toward the main entrance. The door of the classroom he had seen Helen Caulfield enter earlier was open. Glancing in as he passed it, he saw Helen seated behind the instructor's desk in front. Apparently Thompson had located Shirley Winters first, and after starting her toward Dr. Blake's office, had gone to find Dr. Caulfield.

Shayne was glad the deputy hadn't gotten to Helen yet. He wasn't enthusiastic about witnessing her first shock and grief when she learned that Alex Blake had been murdered.

V

IT WASN'T THE custom to lock front doors in Lakeview. Shayne walked into the Caulfield house and used the phone in the front hall to place a call to the *Miami Daily News*. He asked for Timothy Rourke.

When the reporter came to the phone, Shayne said, "This is Mike, Tim. I'm up at Lakeview College. Will you do a little morgue browsing for me?"

"The city morgue or our newspaper morgue?" Rourke inquired.

"Your own. About ten years ago the wife of a Dr. Alexander Blake died in Miami of an overdose of sleeping tablets. Her first name was Janet and at the time he was a professor at Miami University. I'd like you to look up the details for me."

"Sure, Mike. Any particular angle you're interested in?"

"I'd like to know if there was any suspicion that it may have been murder. And if there was, who raised the suspicion."

"Will do. Where can I reach you?"

Shayne read him the number from the phone's dial plate.

After hanging up, Shayne thought for a minute, then placed another long-distance call. This one he made person-to-person to Edgar Cannon at the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* Building. There was a several minute wait after reaching the newspaper switchboard before Cannon could be located and summoned to the phone.

When the man finally came to the phone, the detective said, "This is Mike Shayne, Ed."

"Well I'll be doggoned," Ed Cannon said in an amazed voice. "How are things, Mike?"

"Fine. I wasn't sure you'd still be a reporter on the *Post,* Ed. I just took a chance."

"Reporter!" Cannon said indignantly. "You're speaking to an assistant city editor."

"Well, well," Shayne said. "Congratulations. Can you do me a favor?"

"Sure, Mike. Name it."

"This is going to be a tough one. I want some dope on a death that goes back twenty-five years."

"Well, our morgue goes back a lot farther than that."

"The trouble is, I don't know the date, or even the exact year. Twenty-five years is just an approximation."

"Hmm. Well, give it to me and I'll see what I can do."

"It was a woman named Marcia Blake, Ed. Her husband was Dr. Alexander Blake. Ph D, not M.D. He was a history professor." After a pause he added, "Up to ten years ago he taught history anyway. Back then he may not have had his Ph D yet, or may not even have been in the teaching profession."

"That all you have on it?" Cannon asked.

"All except that the woman was supposed to have died from food poisoning. If you locate the death, I'd like to know two things: if there was any suspicion of murder, and if anyone *did* yell murder, the identity of that person."

"I'll put somebody right on it," Cannon said. "Where can I reach you?"

Shayne read the number from the dial plate a second time.

A half hour later Shayne was quietly smoking a cigarette in the front room when Dr. Caulfield

and Helen entered the house. Killing his cigarette, Shayne went into the front hall to meet them. Helen was weeping and Caulfield had an arm about her waist.

"Oh, Mike," Helen said when she saw him. "He's dead. I'll never see him again."

Bursting into sobs, she ran to the stairs and stumbled up them to her room.

Caulfield glanced at Shayne and looked away again. His face was pale and he suddenly looked old. "Thank God he never found out I was going to have his past investigated," he said in an unsteady voice.

He walked into the front room and collapsed into a chair. He started to rise again when the phone suddenly rang, but Shayne motioned him back and went to answer it himself. It was Edgar Cannon calling back from St. Louis.

"This was like falling off a log, Mike," Cannon said. "It was just twenty-five years ago. Mrs. Marcia Blake died at City Hospital on August twenty-ninth, Nineteen thirty-five. The diagnosis was botulism."

"It was *what?*"

"Botulism, the deadliest kind of food poisoning. As you know, it's not the same as ptomaine. Ptomaine develops only in the presence of air, and botulism in its absence. In botulism the mortality ranges from thirty to sixty percent, or higher. In this case it was traced to some home-canned string beans."

Shayne asked, "Any suggestion of foul play?"

"Hardly. She was poisoned at a Sunday-school picnic at Forest Park Highlands. Along with twelve other people. The beans were furnished by one of the other women in the church. The woman who canned them died too. In fact six out of the twelve died."

"Then it couldn't possibly have been murder?"

"Not a chance in the world. The investigation disclosed that all the string beans stored in the woman's basement had been improperly prepared for canning and contained the toxin."

Shayne asked, "Did anyone even suggest it was murder, or demand an investigation?"

"No mention of it in the news files," Cannon said. "Sorry to spoil your day."

"You've been a big help," Shayne told him. "Thanks a lot, Ed. I'll send you a bottle of cognac for Christmas."

Hanging up, he went into the front room. "If it will make you feel any better, Doc, your friend didn't murder his first wife anyway. I just talked to St. Louis."

Caulfield looked up dully. "Oh?" he asked without much interest.

"She died of food poisoning,

just as Dr. Blake said. It couldn't possibly have been murder."

Caulfield looked away again. In a heavy voice he said, "I guess it's a matter of only academic interest now anyway, Mike. There's no point in going on with the investigation."

"I think there is," Shayne said quietly.

Caulfield looked up again.

"You won't have to pay for it," Shayne said. "I'll follow up on my own."

"Why?" the professor asked.

"Blake wasn't a client of mine, but he was a near-client. I don't like to leave loose ends lying around. I'm going to find his killer."

Caulfield shook himself out of his lethargy. "Of course, Mike. Alex was my friend and Helen's fiance. Naturally we both want his murderer punished. I'm afraid I'm still not thinking very clearly. Please consider yourself still engaged by me until the killer is apprehended."

"If you want it that way," Shayne said with a shrug. "But I'll do the same work whether you're my client or not."

"I want it that way," Caulfield assured him. "I regard it as a personal obligation."

As in most small towns, at the first rumor of trouble the neighbors descended in a swarm with offers to help the Caulfields over the crisis. It wasn't just curiosity which brought them, but sincere good-neighborliness.

The first to arrive was a rather imposing-looking woman named Anna Heritage, the wife of one of the professors. She took things completely in hand. She announced that she was acting as housekeeper and cook until after Blake's funeral, so that Helen could be relieved of such mundane cares in her hour of grief.

Neither Helen nor her father seemed to resent the intrusion. In fact, when as one of her duties Mrs. Heritage assumed the task of fending off other neighborly offers of help, they seemed to welcome it. Every time the doorbell rang she stood like a bulwark in the front door, accepting with thanks the sympathy tendered by neighbors, but allowing no one to pass.

One visitor who did get in was young George Miller. Anna Heritage admitted him because he asked to see Shayne.

It was mid-afternoon when Miller arrived. Both Dr. Caulfield and Helen were upstairs at the time, so the youth found the redhead alone in the front room.

"Hi, Mr. Shayne," he said. "I just dropped by to see you. I thought maybe you'd like to know what happened after you left."

"Why," Shayne said, "what did happen?"

"Well, they established that the murder weapon was a paper knife that usually lay on the classroom

desk. It had been wiped clean of prints. They figure the killer just picked it up, walked around behind Dr. Blake and stabbed him while he wasn't paying any attention. You see, there were some term papers on the desk before him, which he seemed to have been grading at the time. They figure it must have been somebody he knew pretty well, or he wouldn't have gone on grading papers in front of him. Or her, as the case may be."

"Brilliant," Shayne growled. "Was there anybody around here he didn't know well?"

Miller blinked. "I guess not, now that you mention it. I never thought of that. Anyway, they took Mr. Turner along in the sheriff's department car when they left. As a material witness, they said, but I think they really wanted to give him more of a grilling about being the last person seen with Dr. Blake."

Miller seemed depressed by Shayne's lack of interest in his theorizing. "Well, I guess I'd better be getting along," he said. "I'm going home for the weekend. I hope you break the case before I get back."

A moment after Miller left the phone rang and Anna came to tell Shayne it was for him.

It was Timothy Rourke. The reporter said, "I could have called you earlier, Mike, but I went out to make a personal check on something I thought you'd want to know. Mrs. Janet Blake was found dead in her bed at home on the morning of June fourteenth, nineteen fifty. Her ten-year-old son found her. A Dr. Martin Crowe signed the death certificate. There was a police investigation and an inquest, and the finding was that it was an accidental overdose of sleeping tablets."

Shayne said, "What was that about a ten-year-old son?"

"He was from a previous marriage," Rourke said. "The woman had only been married to Dr. Blake about three months. Seems the professor got up early to go fishing that morning and didn't want to disturb his wife. So he didn't know she had died in the middle of the night until he got back. Actually the inquest finding could have been suicide, but the coroner's jury gave Mrs. Blake the benefit of the doubt."

"How do you mean?" Shayne asked.

"Twice during the previous three years the woman had to be rushed to the hospital for emergency treatment. Suicide attempts. Both tries occurred before Blake married her, and he testified at the inquest that he'd been unaware of either attempt. He also testified that she hadn't been depressed, which is why they gave her the benefit of the doubt and called it an accident."

"I see," Shayne said. "There

was no suggestion that it might have been murder?"

"As a matter of fact there was," Rourke said. "Janet's mother charged that Blake deliberately poisoned her daughter. But she didn't have any proof, and to all appearances it seems to have been just a greed-inspired attempt to break her daughter's will. Janet left Blake about fifteen grand, you see. She left her mother twice that sum, and about sixty grand in trust to her son by the previous marriage. But apparently the old lady didn't want Blake to have a cent. At the inquest they seem to have brushed her off as just a battle-axe of a mother-in-law trying to cause trouble. She is a battle-axe. That's what took me so long. I went to see her."

"Oh?" Shayne said.

"She's an old gal about sixty-five named Lydia Parrish. Janet Parrish was Mrs. Blake's maiden name. She lives in a big home over on the west side. I thought I might get some information from her, but all I got for my trouble was a tirade. When I mentioned Dr. Alexander Blake, she yelled that she didn't care to discuss a wife murderer. Then she slammed the door in my face."

"Hmm," Shayne said. "Maybe I'd better make her a visit too. What's her address?"

Rourke gave him a street number. "She's a pretty tough customer."

When Rourke hung up, Shayne called the sheriff's office and asked to speak to Deputy Everett Spawn. Instead he got Andrew Thompson, who said Spawn wasn't in and wanted to know if he could take a message.

"Sure," the redhead said. "This is Michael Shayne. Tell him I have to drive back to Miami, and if he wants me, he can phone my office there."

"He might be a little upset," Thompson said, a trifle stiffly. "You're a material witness in a murder case."

"I'll return whenever Spawn needs me," Shayne told him coldly. "Meantime I have business to take care of, and I'm not roosting here until you make up your minds to have an inquest at some dim future date."

"All right, I'll tell him," Thompson said, clearly squelched by the anger in Shayne's voice.

VI

IT WAS NEARLY six P.M. when Shayne got to the fringes of Miami and edged his car into the southbound traffic. When he reached his apartment, the detective tossed his bag on the floor of the bedroom and phoned Lucy at home to tell her he was back in town.

When she started to list the various headaches which had come up during his absence and which

required his urgent attention, he said, "Save it until tomorrow, angel. I'll see you at the office sometime before noon."

He stopped for dinner en route to the home of Mrs. Lydia Parrish. It was just seven thirty P.M. when he arrived there.

It was a big, old-fashioned home on a quiet street. A white picket fence encased a yard studded with tall palms. Shayne pushed through the gate and followed a curving flagstone walk to the wide veranda. The old-fashioned bell-push brought a woman of about sixty-five to the door.

She was a formidable-looking creature, tall and angular and with a hatchet face framed by hair dyed jet black and pulled severely backward into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. As warm as the weather was, she wore a tailored black suit with a jacket whose sleeves came to the wrists.

Gazing down her thin nose at the detective, she said, "Yes?"

"Are you Mrs. Lydia Parrish?" Shayne inquired.

She gave a frigid nod.

"My name is Michael Shayne, Mrs. Parrish," he said. "May I come in?"

After gazing at him for a moment, she stepped aside. She led him into an immaculate front room furnished with mid-Victorian furniture in perfect condition. Seating herself in an upholstered rocking chair, she folded her hands in her lap and waited. Shayne sank into one half of an enormous mohair sofa.

"I'm investigating a murder, Mrs. Parrish, and I think you may have some helpful information."

Her expression showed no interest whatever. She merely waited for him to go on.

"Dr. Alexander Blake was once your son-in-law, wasn't he?" Shayne asked.

The woman's body went suddenly tense. She leapt to her feet, her eyes blazing. "You sent that man today! I told him I will not discuss the man who murdered my daughter. Get out!"

Shayne merely crossed his legs and eyed her curiously.

"I said get out!" She almost screamed the words.

"Sit down and shut up," the redhead said bluntly.

Her mouth drooped open and she stared at him aghast. "What did you say?" she inquired in unbelieving tone.

"I said sit down and shut up. I'm investigating a murder, Mrs. Parrish, and I think you may have pertinent information. You'll either talk to me here and now, or I'll have you taken down to police headquarters and booked as a material witness. Take your choice."

She sat down abruptly and clenched her hands in her lap. Her face was very pale and her jaws clamped together so tightly her

mouth became a hard, white line. "No one has ever talked to me like that," she whispered.

"It's about time someone did," Shayne said. "We'll start over. Dr. Blake was your son-in-law, wasn't he?"

After gazing at him with a stunned expression for a moment, she allowed her lips to barely move. "For about three months. Then he murdered my daughter to inherit her money."

"Why do you say that?" Shayne asked. "The inquest finding was accidental death."

"He was clever," she whispered. "And cruel. He left her dead for a ten-year-old boy to find."

"Do you have any real evidence of that, or is it just your unfounded belief?"

Her voice rose a little "Unfounded? His behavior afterward proved he never wanted anything from my daughter but her money. Since the day of her funeral he has never set foot in this house."

The redhead said dryly, "Can you blame him for not visiting a mother-in-law who accused him of murder?"

The woman's eyes glittered. "Did the boy do anything to him? He hasn't seen or written to my grandson since the funeral either. Not even a birthday card. If he had loved my daughter, would he have discarded her son the moment he got his hands on Janet's money by murdering her? My daughter wasn't the first wife he murdered for money, you know."

"Oh?" Shayne said.

"He poisoned a wife in the midwest fifteen years before he married my daughter. What do you think of that?"

"Who told you that he murdered her?" Shayne inquired.

"My daughter. He confessed to her."

Shayne cocked a shaggy eyebrow. "That sounds a little farfetched, Mrs. Parrish."

"Oh, he claimed it was accidental," the woman said. "and no doubt he was careful to make it look like an accident, just as he arranged my daughter's murder. He was smooth enough to tell Janet part of the story, so she wouldn't become suspicious if she ever heard the true circumstances of his first wife's death."

Shayne suddenly realized he was wasting his time. The woman had no actual knowledge of anything. She merely had a distorted mind full of suspicions that had festered for years until she was convinced of their truth.

Rising to his feet, he said, "I don't believe you have the information I want, Mrs. Parrish. Sorry to have bothered you."

Her voice had gradually risen until it was almost shrill, but now it sank to a whisper again. "He's murdered a third wife now, hasn't he?"

Shayne looked at her. "What makes you think that?"

"Why would you be asking these questions otherwise? You said you were investigating a murder."

"I am," Shayne said. "But this time your former son-in-law is the corpse."

Turning, he went to the door and let himself out. His last glimpse of her from the front hall was of her still seated in the rocking chair staring after him, her face drained of all color.

The idea occurred to Shayne as he was having a nightcap in his apartment. But by then it was too late at night to pay a return visit to Mrs. Parrish. He slept on it and was up early the next morning, determined to make the most of the next few hours.

The day being on a Saturday, the City Hall was open only until noon. Shayne got there at nine A.M. At the City Clerk's office he paid fifty cents for a certified copy of a marriage license issued ten years before.

After looking it over, he called the girl who had made it out for him back to the counter.

"This shows a marriage license issued to Alexander Blake and Janet Parrish," Shayne said. "Parrish was the woman's maiden name, but I happen to know she was married once before."

"Probably had her first marriage annulled and took back her maiden name," the girl said. "It happens all the time."

"She had a son by the first marriage, though. Would she take back her maiden name under those circumstances?"

"I see what you mean. Actually, courts seldom grant annulments when there's a child," the girl said. "But sometimes the woman doesn't know she's going to have a baby until the annulment becomes valid, and she has her maiden name back. There isn't much she can do then."

Shayne asked, "Think you can find the record of the annulment?"

"If you have the date, or at least the year."

"The son was ten years old in nineteen fifty. Assuming she had the marriage annulled before he was born, it would be nineteen thirty-nine or forty."

"I'll see what I can find," the girl said, and went away.

Fifteen minutes later she came back and traded the detective another small slip of paper for another fifty cents.

VII

WHEN MRS. LYDIA PARRISH answered the door this time, she didn't look very formidable. She looked drained, as though she hadn't slept all night. Her face grew pinched when she saw Shayne and her eyes turned a little glassy.

Shayne said quietly, "Since I

was here last night you've discovered how effective the poison you sowed was, haven't you? Is he here?"

She didn't answer. She merely stepped aside helplessly, moving like a robot.

Shayne went past her into the front room. The woman trailed after him. George Miller was standing by the front windows with an alert, waiting expression on his face. He gave Shayne a defiant look.

"I supposed it was only a matter of time before you'd get to me, Mr. Shayne," he said. "I'm not sorry. I'd do it again."

Shayne tugged at his left earlobe. He glanced at Mrs. Parrish, who collapsed into the upholstered rocking chair with a despairing moan.

The detective said, "Alex Blake never recognized you, did he? You were only ten when he saw you last, and your name was George Parrish. He knew your mother's first husband was named Miller, of course, but it's a common name. George Miller wouldn't ring any bell."

"He deserved it," Miller said. "I saved Helen Caulfield's life. Do you think I could stand by and let him poison a fine woman like her? He deserved to die and you know it."

Shayne looked at Lydia Parrish. "You're the one who should go to the electric chair for this," he said, in a tone of deadly calmness.

The woman flinched. George Miller turned white.

"You can't talk to my grandmother like that," he said, his lips trembling.

"The hell I can't," the detective said roughly. "She fed you lies about Alex Blake until she drove you to murder. Blake never poisoned anybody. He was a fine man."

"A fine man! He murdered two wives. One of them was my mother!"

"He didn't murder her," Shayne said firmly. "Blake's first wife died in the St. Louis City Hospital on August twenty-ninth, nineteen thirty-five. Of botulism. Do you know what that is?"

"Sure. It's a type of food poisoning. He was clever enough to make it look like food poisoning."

"She got it from some string beans served at a Sunday school picnic," Shayne said. "Twelve other people got it too. Six of them died, including the woman who had canned the beans. They found her basement full of similar canned beans, all of them containing the same toxin."

Miller blinked. "Well, he definitely murdered my mother, anyway."

"Your mother was a suicide," Shayne told him. "She tried the sleeping-pill route twice before she ever married Dr. Blake. The two

previous times they saved her life by rushing her to a hospital. The third time she was beyond help."

The young man looked dazed. His gaze moved to his grandmother. "He's lying, granny, isn't he? *Granny—*"

The woman was staring straight ahead of her. Her mouth opened and closed like that of a goldfish kissing the side of a bowl. But she made no sound.

The boy looked back at Shayne. "It can't be true," he insisted on a note of desperation. "If he was innocent, why didn't he ever come to see me? Or even write?"

"Probably because your grandmother wouldn't let him see you," Shayne said brutally. "He'd have no legal right if she wanted to prevent it. She probably tore up his letters as fast as they arrived. It didn't suit her hate campaign for you ever to hear any side of the story but the one she fed you over and over."

The boy stared wildly at his grandmother. "Is he telling the truth?" he asked in a high voice.

When she didn't either answer or look at him, his voice rose to a scream. "Did you lie to me? Was it all lies? Granny—Granny! *Answer me!*"

The woman merely hunched her shoulders and clenched her hands together until the knuckles showed white. Shayne put his hand on the boy's arm.

"Let's go," he said bitterly. He wasn't quite certain that Lydia Parrish could be legally charged with complicity but was hopeful that it could somehow be arranged.

"THE HOMICIDAL VIRGIN" by Brett Halliday

It's Mike Shayne! It's Book-Length! It's Complete Next Month!

The Sensitivity of Murder

by JOSEPH DICKINSON

On the barren shores of guilt time comes dripping slow . . . for a wife killer.

LIEUTENANT SUSS sat before Inspector Wilson's desk, pensively drumming his fingers along its edge. He gazed unhappily at his feet. They were too large for the body build of the chubby little detective and he knew that when he used them in an active way they would hurt. "There is no perfect corn plaster," he mused. "One of the outrages of our age."

©1960, by Joseph Dickinson

"Stop that damned tapping," growled Wilson.

"Does it annoy you?" Suss folded his hands submissively in his lap, and stared accusingly at Wilson. The spaniel eyes were too much.

Wilson looked away and said guiltily, "Benson and Wilkinson watched Kline's apartment for two weeks. They were bored to death. He didn't leave his bed, didn't wiggle a toe."

"Back injuries have been faked before," said Suss. "For longer periods. And for Kline in particular, everything is at stake. He must be careful—excruciatingly so. Consider the mind of such a man. Every impulse must be alert, intensified, every thought, every spoken word, carefully sifted, weighed, tested. *Hypersensitive,* is the word to describe a murderer. Perhaps this is what we call conscience. There is pain in such sensitivity. And it will show itself."

"You fascinate me," said Wilson sardonically. "However, I would like to point out that the doctors, in their own groping way, have determined that there is clearly indicated damage to the man's spine. It could easily cause paralysis."

"Could," said Suss significantly.

"What more proof do you need!" exploded Wilson. "Why are you on Kline, anyhow?"

Suss turned hurt eyes upon him. "I have reason to be suspicious," he said indignantly.

"Why? Because of the insurance?"

Suss shook his head. "Ten thousand dollars, even for such a poor family, is not exorbitant nowadays."

"Then what?"

Suss said, "Kline cheated on his unemployment insurance once, several years ago."

Wilson guffawed. "Suss, if that's all you—"

"Please," said Suss. "He was found out and, although the sentence was suspended, he was fined, and an end was brought to his record of—to put it mildly—frequent unemployment. Then, eight months ago, we come to his accident. When he was unloading rolls of paper at the newspaper loading dock, several rolls tumbled upon him, injuring his spine. If he could walk again in six months, well and good, the doctors said. If not . . ." Suss shrugged.

"Go on," urged Wilson.

"He could not walk in six months," said Suss. "Or so he has been very careful to pretend. In seven months his wife took out another policy, also for ten thousand dollars, increasing the total coverage to twenty thousand."

"She was worried about something happening to her, about dying and leaving him completely alone. Her insurance agent confirmed that himself. She discussed

it with him with real anxiety and at great length."

"Ideas can be planted," said Suss. "Easier than we would like to believe."

"Then this was a poor seed," said Wilson. "Mrs. Kline—or Mr. Kline, as you apparently think—obviously didn't realize that suicide invalidates insurance."

"Only if it occurs before the date of incontestability," said Suss. "And there is still the other policy. Long past this date."

"Ten thousand dollars!" scoffed Wilson.

"It has been done for less," said Suss doggedly. "At any rate, a week after taking out the additional insurance, Mrs. Kline throws herself—so her husband says—from a fourth floor window to die of a broken neck, while he watches completely helpless and aghast."

"Suss," Wilson aimed a finger for emphasis, "did it occur to you that if Kline had claimed it was an accident, he could have collected forty thousand dollars, double indemnity?"

Suss pursed his lips. "True. But Kline is no fool. It is easier to jump than to fall from a window. And the fact that by calling it suicide Kline loses thirty thousand dollars is enough to cast doubt on any suspicion of—" Suss hesitated, scowling. He disliked to use the word, *murder*. "I think perhaps he considered all this," he concluded abruptly, as if hoping the omission would pass unnoticed.

"Tell me one thing, Suss. We have a paralyzed husband, and a wife who makes scarcely enough to meet basic living expenses. But she loves him so much that she increases her insurance and leaps from a window so that he will have enough money for an operation on his spine. Everything fits beautifully. His grief, if an act, is worthy of a Pulitzer Prize. Tell me one sound reason to suspect him."

Suss hesitated. "Well," he said, "I was there when they removed the body. She was a poor thin little woman. There was a carton of milk crushed beneath her left shoulder."

"What?"

"They didn't even have a refrigerator," said Suss. "They kept their milk and other perishables on the window sill. Under the woman's body was a carton of milk."

Wilson frowned, puzzled.

"I think if she had jumped," Suss explained, "she would have first removed the milk from the window sill."

"Good Lord! People don't think of things like that when they're about to kill themselves."

"They do if they are poor," said Suss. "Mrs. Kline had been poor for all of her thirty years."

"That's the most ridiculous—Have you finished, Suss?"

Suss stared at his feet. "I have a feeling about the husband," he said.

Wilson rose and jammed his hands into his pockets. He glowered down at Suss. "Know your trouble, Suss? You simplify, play hunches, depend too much on intuition. Wait, hold on, damn it. Don't get your dander up." Suss had risen indignantly. "I'm just saying that you can't play policeman by instinct."

"I never 'play' policeman," said Suss, "and I don't consider a simple psychological observation instinct."

"You admit it's a pretty minor point to base a suspicion of murder on?"

"Perhaps," said Suss.

"Now if you could prove that Kline isn't paralyzed," said Wilson, "we might get somewhere. It's something that Benson, Wilkinson, or the doctors haven't been able to prove," he said sarcastically.

Suss brightened. "Then I may stay on the case?" he asked.

"No!" thundered Wilson. "The doctors say he could be—probably is—hopelessly paralyzed. Benson and Wilkinson have watched him every minute for two weeks. At *your insistence,*" he concluded darkly.

"I have an idea," said Suss.

"No," said Wilson.

"I would like to take the afternoon off," said Suss. "I have some free time coming to me, I believe."

Wilson stared at Suss in exasperation. "You'd take it on your own time? Good God." He considered the blotter on his desk for a moment, then looked back at Suss. "Look," he said, "If I let you stay with it—for this one afternoon—and you can't prove anything conclusive, will you call it off?"

Suss thought a moment. "All right. If that's the way it has to be."

"Go ahead then. Let's get it settled once and for all."

"I would like the assistance of Patrolman O'Hara. Only for a few hours."

"All right," Wilson said resignedly. "Take him. You don't need me, too, do you?" he asked cynically.

"I'm pretty sure you would find it interesting," mused Suss. "Yes—why not?"

Wilson stared at him in amazement. "You'd like to teach me a few police fundamentals, is that it?"

"You're putting words into my mouth," said Suss. "I merely thought you might find it interesting."

"I'll be damned," said Wilson. He took his jacket from the back of the chair. "I think I will." Shaking his head he preceded Suss to the door. "Just what is this idea of yours, Suss?"

"It came to me last night," wheezed Suss, "as I lay in bed." He quickened his short, ambling gait to keep abreast of Wilson,

wishing he had his companion's long legs.

"What is it? Or would you rather keep it to yourself."

"I'd prefer to tell you later."

"Afraid it won't work?"

"A little," Suss admitted. "And if it doesn't— Well, no one wishes to appear ridiculous."

"Is it ridiculous?"

"Only if it doesn't work," said Suss, panting as they descended the stairs.

"Do you get all your ideas in bed?" asked Wilson.

Suss shook his head. "Very few. I fall asleep almost immediately. But this one, I could get nowhere else."

WHEN KLINE CALLED for them to come in, Wilson was still puffing from the many stairs, and muttering between puffs. "Well, here we are," he had exclaimed as they came to a halt before the apartment building. "I suppose you're just going to come right out and ask him if he killed her."

"Naturally not." Suss smiled indulgently. "This is purely a social call."

Wilson muttered complainingly under his breath but followed Suss. The sound of their feet striking the bare wood floor echoed in the modestly furnished apartment. Kline was sitting up in bed, propped by pillows. He smiled wanly.

"Lieutenant Suss," he acknowledged, and looked questioningly at Wilson.

"This is—ah—Sergeant Wilson," said Suss, ignoring the Inspector's quick look of amazement and reproach.

"Is there—anything wrong?"

"No, no," Suss assured him. "We were in the neighborhood. I thought I would see if there was anything I could do. How you were feeling."

Kline turned his face to the wall. "What difference does it make?" he choked.

Soap opera dialogue, thought Suss, but his voice was sympathetic: "You must face life again, Mr. Kline." I can be just as trite, he thought. "After all, your wife— I mean, she made the choice with full knowledge of what she was doing."

Kline sobbed, and turned away again, clenching a soft white fist to his mouth. Finally he retained sufficient control to say in a tremulous half-sob: "You're right, of course."

"Of course," said Suss. "Now, if there is anything you need . . ."

"No. Thank you, but I have everything I need—except—except—" His voice broke, and a trembling seized him.

Suss touched his shoulder gently. "There now." He waited until the man's trembling stopped. "Does someone come in?" he asked. "I mean—you're not left completely alone?"

Kline wiped his eyes. "The woman downstairs—Mrs. Santos—comes in twice a day, at seven and five. She works, but she always leaves me sandwiches and a thermos of coffee for my lunch."

"That's kind of her," said Suss. "Well," he took the pitcher from the table beside the bed, "let me get you some fresh water."

"Don't trouble," said Kline.

"No trouble at all," said Suss. "The kitchen's in here, I see." The sink and fixtures were galvanized, and heavily tarnished. Suss pushed aside some dishes and cooking utensils and turned on the cold water. "Does Mrs. Santos see to the housework?" he called.

"Yes," said Kline. "I don't know what I'd do without her."

Suss returned and placed the pitcher on the table. "We must go now, I'm afraid. If there is ever anything you need . . ."

"Thank you," said Kline. "I—I hadn't realized. I mean, everyone has been so kind."

"With few exceptions," said Suss. "It's an understanding world. Shall we go—Sergeant?"

On the third floor, Suss repeated his instructions to the waiting Patrolman. "O'Hara," he said, "remember what I told you. If any other calls come through on this instrument,"—he touched the ancient telephone on the wall of the hallway—"inform the caller politely, but quickly that the phone is tied up on police business. When, and if, a special call comes through and the caller says 'Now, O'Hara' you know what to do. And make it on the double quick. Understand?"

O'Hara grinned. "Yes, sir."

"What the devil is this?" asked Wilson.

"Just have patience," said Suss. "We'll do our waiting in the building across the street—if you don't mind a few more steps."

"Hell," growled Wilson. "Why ask? I'm only a sergeant."

INSPECTOR WILSON sat moodily beside the window, not bothering to look out, as Suss was doing, at the apartment building opposite. Kline's bed was clearly visible from where they were sitting. He was reading a magazine.

"This is the same room Benson and Wilkinson had, isn't it?" asked Wilson.

Suss nodded but said nothing.

"Do you know how much that extension cost the taxpayers?" Wilson asked, pointing to the phone which Suss held in his lap.

Suss held up his hand. "Please. I can't afford to let anything distract me."

Wilson lighted a cigarette, and stared gloomily at the ribbon of smoke. "There are a million things I should be doing," he said. Suss made no comment. "Suss, you said you had an idea."

"That's right," said Suss.

"Well?"

"I'm pretty sure that today Mr.

Kline will take a chance on moving about."

Wilson got to his feet. "You mean to say you're basing everything on a mere hunch—"

"It's more than a hunch," said Suss. "We must be patient." He glanced at his watch and frowned. "As I calculated last night," he said, "it should not have been over two hours."

"It hasn't been. What precisely are you counting on?"

Without taking his eyes from Kline's window, Suss checked the points off on his fingers. "The loneliness. The silence. The sensitivity of a murderer's mind—two conflicting frames of mind, actually. Caution—but caution dulled by a soothing sense of security, which is what our visit was to build up—among other things. I hope," worried Suss, "that it did not have the opposite effect of apprehension. Then add one small factor . . ."

"What small factor? Stop talking in riddles, Suss."

"Wait." Suss's voice was urgent. "Any moment now—"

Wilson leaned to the window, galvanized into instant attentiveness by Suss's tone. He stared at Kline's window. "You were right," he breathed. "Suss—" But Suss was already dialing.

"HE WAS ROCKED back on his heels." O'Hara jerked a thumb at the sullen Kline, slumped in a kitchen chair. "He just didn't know what to do. Finally he made a break for the door. I had to hit him. Sorry, Lieutenant."

"Violence should expect to be met with violence," said Suss sadly. "And this man's violence was particularly cruel."

Wilson shook his head. "I still don't see how you knew it would be today."

There was no victory in Suss's voice. The termination of a case was never completely gratifying to him. "There were many reasons."

"You said there was one small thing." Wilson turned to Kline. "Why did you get out of bed, Kline? *Why today?*"

Kline continued to stare sullenly at the floor.

"Listen," said Suss.

After a moment, Wilson said, "I don't hear anything." He looked at O'Hara. The officer shook his head.

There was silence again. Wilson and O'Hara frowned. "It's a small thing," said Suss. "You can detect it better, perhaps, by its absence."

He reached to the sink and twisted shut the galvanized valve of the faucet, and watched the water in the pan as the ripples disappeared.

Wilson smiled a crooked, incredulous smile, Kline's head slumped a little more, and the silence in the room, for the first time in several hours, became real.

"You see, the drip got on his nerves," Suss said.

MURDER FOR

A Chilling, Sharply Detailed Mystery Novelet

A bachelor club for actors may have a strong liking for Shakespearean tradition. But that liking can be shaken when the floors echo to the Law's tread and "the very stones cry murder!"

by NORMAN ANTHONY

THE NIGHT Lou Calder was murdered at the Thespis Club I was having a drink with him. My city editor wouldn't call that news, but what made it come under the head of Odd and Unusual, was the fact that the Great Lover of stage, screen, and television, married and divorced four times, and always surrounded by languishing females, died in a men's club where women were barred.

In case you're not acquainted with it, the Thespis is a very old institution in a very old building. The edifice is crumbling with age and tradition, and its dim rooms are cluttered with theatrical playbills, ghostly busts and commemoratory tablets proving that all the world's a stage to a great many people. As they say in those playbills, the entire action of this non-Elizabethan drama took place in the Inferno, which the more sedate, upper-floor members called the grillroom in the basement.

The entrance to this chamber of horrors was the answer to an actor's prayer, and, ironically enough, supplied the answer to the mystery of Lou Calder's murder.

It was a broad, curving stairway, descending from the lobby. The shallow steps widened as they approached the bottom, making the most insignificant arrival a commanding figure, no matter how much sound and fury was

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MEMBERS ONLY

going on below. Said sound and fury was a nightly occurrence at the Thespis. It ran the gamut of emotions from the room-width bar at the street front of the low-ceilinged room, through the oaken tables in the center, where the sitting members had to shout at each other to be heard above the bedlam coming from the pool table in the rear, to say nothing of the switchboard desk and the four booths adjoining it where the phoners never bothered to close the doors.

I was at the bar that evening, talking to Gus, the bartender, and as I look back now, there was an aura of tension in the room. Maybe it was just my nose-for-news imagination, but the atmosphere was like that around a ring just before the main event, and the hanging copper lamps over the pool table heightened the effect. There, a foursome of out-of-work actors were playing rotation, but their hearts didn't seem to be in it, particularly Clint Saunders, whose wife was in Lou Calder's new play opening that night. There had been rumors during the road tryout that she was Lou's latest romance.

It was hard to believe; Clint was one of the handsomest young actors in the business, with wavy dark hair, soft brown eyes, and the classic features of an Adonis. He was also sensitive and rather shy, an unusual trait in the theatrical profession, and I'd never been able to figure out whether it was because his parents were a famous stage pair, or because of his almost feminine beauty.

But there was nothing else feminine about him, and I remembered a night at the bar when another actor had kidded him about it, and Clint's soft-brown eyes had lit up with a blazing, murderous fire that shriveled the potential admirer into frightened retreat.

I also remembered Clint's wife, Jane, a beautiful little platinum blonde, with a vivacious but otherwise empty nature, and I hoped for Clint's sake the rumor wasn't true. He wore his love for her like a shining mantle, not knowing it was a shroud, and it occurred to me that we all do that, whether it's a cushy job with the boss or a mink coat.

I will now give you the characters in this Shakespearean tragedy, in the order of their appearance: Nevil Warton, a heavy-set, truculent British import, who was playing gin rummy with Gordon Stone, the sculptor who looked like his own statues. The name not only fitted, but his features were rocklike, from the craggy bald dome, fringed with iron-gray hair, to the jutting jaw. There was something coldly sinister about Stone's smug taciturnity, and the fact that he was married to Calder's first wife, and also working on a bust of the actor, made him

even more sinister, as things developed.

Curiously enough, he and Gus, the bartender, resembled each other; Gus was in his sixties, with the same powerful build. Sometimes I had wondered if beneath his patient air of servitude, there wasn't a smoldering resentment against these professional playboys who treated him as an old family retainer.

Gus had been with the club for forty years. He was father-confessor, money-lender, theatrical angel, and I was kidding him about it that night, asking him how he had stood it so long, and wouldn't he rather be on the other side of the bar?

Wiping the worn mahogany, he said, "This side has its advantages too, Mr. Bidwell."

I caught the irony in his voice and was trying to figure out what he meant when Lou Calder made his customary midnight appearance, pausing halfway down the stairs with unsteady but histrionic deliberation. Lou was a gaunt, Mephistophelean giant, and what the lady columnists flutteringly called brutally handsome, with dark, mocking eyes in a Roman emperor's face.

He was hatless, a light yellow polo coat draped over his shoulders, and as it flapped open you could see there was nothing underneath but the thick black hair on his naked chest, and a pair of pajama trousers. He was very drunk, and his, "Ah, the playboys of the western world!" was followed by a loonlike laugh that didn't go at all with his powerful physique.

The sudden lull in the wake of his lordly march to the bar was as dramatic as his entrance, and I watched the faces around the room. It was like looking at a panorama of hate and envy, and, in Clint Saunders' case, jealous torment. Taking his place at the end of the bar against the wall, Lou beckoned to Gus with a sardonic smirk.

"A double martini, menial, and prepared with your utmost cunning!" he said.

Leaning back, Calder surveyed the brotherhood with lofty derision. "On with your innocuous little games, children!" His loon laugh seemed to reverberate from the low, sound-proofed ceiling. "An air-conditioned playpen for bottle babies weaned on milk from discontented cows!"

It was really funny. You could almost smell the antipathy in the smoke-filled air. But this was a gentleman's club, and they were going to be gentlemen if it killed them. In the embarrassed silence, Lou's drunken gaze came to rest on Gordon Stone and he beamed with sadistic delight.

"Well, if it isn't the great stone face in person!" Lou said. "What does your dear wife, and my dear

ex-wife, think of the bust, Gordie? I hope it doesn't make the poor girl homesick. How she used to mother me—I mean, smother me."

Stone's face was gray with suppressed anger. "You're drunk, Lou. Better go home and sleep it off."

Hoping to distract his attention, I nudged Lou and said, "How did the opening go tonight?"

He swung around with a disgusted gesture. "It's a turkey—" Then he gave me a lascivious wink. "Plenty of white meat though."

Calder suddenly became conscious of Clint Saunders who was standing next to me, glaring at him in tight-lipped fury, and he let out that loon laugh again. "Allow me to congratulate you on your wife's performance tonight, Clint. She was magnificently adequate."

I grabbed Clint's arm as he made a move toward Calder, and he stopped and said in a low, tense voice, "Don't speak of her in that way again, Calder."

Lou bowed his head in pretended penitence. "Why, I was about to ask you for her hand in marriage." He laughed shrilly as Clint tried to free himself from my tight grip. "Cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war! Let him go, Bidwell· I eat juveniles for breakfast."

. ."He shouldn't be allowed in the club," a loud voice said, and I saw it was Nevil Warton rising stiffly from the gin table.

Lou peered around until he located him and waved with a mocking smile. "Ah, our bloody British cousin! God save the theatre!"

Warton's face was livid as he glared across the room, then turned away, and as he did Dick Mann came down the stairs, and he couldn't have picked a more unpsychological moment for an entrance. Dick was both a doctor and a psychiatrist, with a brilliant mind and high professional standing. He had treated the club employees as well as the members for years without charge, and he was popular with everybody.

I could feel it coming as he stopped at the foot of the stairs, talking to someone, and Lou saw him. "Well, our favorite headshrinker!" he called out, "Hey, you psychiatric quack, come here!"

I heard Clint's hoarse, "Why, you rotten—"

But I was watching Dick. He hesitated for a second. Then pretending he hadn't heard, he moved toward the bar with a friendly smile, ending up at Lou's corner. "How's our favorite patient, Lou? I think you need a treatment."

Motioning to Gus to give Lou a drink, Dr. Mann smiled at Clint and said, "I went to the opening tonight, Clint. Jane was wonderful."

I let go of Clint's arm, thinking

he was going to talk to Dick, but he looked at Lou and said in a low voice, "Lou, will you go over to the park with me?"

Lou didn't hear him at first and when Clint repeated the challenge, he let out that loonlike laugh. "Why, I'd deem it a privilege, Lochinvar." Turning to Gus he said, "Prepare another libation, my good man, I'll be right back."

II

WITH MOCKING politeness Lou Calder waved Clint Saunders toward the stairs, and you could feel the shocked outrage that swept the room. It was a lamb being led to slaughter, but it was too late to do anything about it.

As they went upstairs, I said to Dick, "What makes a man act that way? I mean, Lou Calder."

"Frustration," Dick shrugged.

"Frustration?" I stared at him. "He's a megalomaniac if I ever saw one. A successful actor, women fawning over him—"

"But not men." Dick smiled.

"Don't tell me you think Calder has a queer streak?"

"It's a form of it." He shrugged again. "To a person like Lou, the admiration of men is essential to his manliness. But he knows they dislike him and it destroys his ego, so his only retaliation is that of the sadistic bully."

"The fight ought to be stopped," I said uneasily.

To my surprise, Dick said, "I don't agree with you. If we didn't have some Davids in the world, it would be run by Goliaths."

"This David hasn't any slingshot," I reminded him.

"Moral decency makes a pretty good one." Dick smiled. "And I don't see anyone else picking up the gauntlet."

"He insulted you," a man spoke up.

Dick looked at the actor, still smiling. "You forget. I'm a physician, specializing in psychiatry. You don't get angry when a very sick man calls you names. You want to help him—if you can."

That stopped the actor cold, then he grinned maliciously as Nevil Warton came up to the bar. "Warton is the one who should have fought him, but I guess he had enough the last time."

Warton had calmed down, but he glared at the taunter. "I'll fight him again whenever he wishes, but the next time I'll kill him."

He wasn't kidding either; everybody in the club remembered that battle that had started at the bar and moved over to the park. Both Warton and Lou had ended up in the hospital, and they hadn't spoken to each other since.

Something told me I wasn't going to work that night, so I called the office, and when I came back to the bar I again had the feeling of a ringside crowd just before the main event, only now it was be-

tween rounds. Lou's exit with Clint had left a suspenseful vacuum. Everybody made an heroic attempt to carry on in the old club tradition of ignoring fights so long as they took place outside the hallowed premises. But they couldn't keep their eyes off the stairway that curved up to the lobby.

Those of us at the bar were doing the same thing, except me. Unconsciously I watched Gus mixing Lou's cocktail, carefully placing it in readiness for him at the vacant place by the wall, and there was a curious smile on his face. And I noticed Gordon Stone pick up the heavy silver water pitcher that stood on the bar near Lou's glass, and pour himself a drink. He was lifting the tumbler to his lips when voices sounded from the lobby and I could see his hand trembling so that the water spilled on his shirt front.

Every face in the room turned toward the stairway, and Lou Calder made his second dramatic entrance of the evening, the polo coat still draped over his shoulders, the same sardonic smile on his face.

"Never send a boy to do a man's work, gentlemen!" he announced, and the loon laugh rang out as he strode to his corner of the bar.

This time the eyes didn't follow him. They were still on the stairway, and then Clint Saunders came down the steps followed by a solicitous trio. Surprisingly enough, he wasn't badly battered except for a bloody nose, and an ugly looking bruise on his cheekbone that evidently had been the finishing touch to a mercifully short battle.

He didn't even glance toward the bar, but went directly to the washroom in the back, and like spectators at a tennis match the members turned to see Lou picking up his cocktail with a mocking flourish.

"To the victor belongs the spoils!" Lou proclaimed in a loud voice, and tossing off the drink in one long swallow, he said to Gus, "Another, barkeep!" Turning, his sardonic gaze swept the room. "Would anyone else like to try for the championship of this puny little world?"

"Yes, you rotten swine!"

It was Nevil Warton, his face flushed with righteous rage, and as he made his way through the tables, for some reason it struck Lou as being very funny. The loonlike laugh rose on the still air, and he took a step toward Warton.

Then his face twisted in a sudden, convulsive grimace. He clutched at the back of his neck and pitched forward to the floor, the yellow polo coat covering him like a shroud.

Dick Mann was nearest to him. He motioned to Gus to bring the silver water pitcher, then knelt down and pulled Lou over on his

back. As he did, Lou gave another convulsive jerk and his body stiffened. Dick leaned over, feeling his heart.

After a moment Dick looked up grimly and said, "He's dead. He's been poisoned."

Even in death, in that grotesque, disjointed posture, lying on a dirty barroom floor in the incongruous pajama trousers, there was something still powerful and evil about Lou Calder. This was no Roman Forum, but he was another Caesar, and looking at the circle of faces staring down at the dead actor, I wondered which one was Casca, or Brutus, or Cinna. And as I remembered Cinna's "Cry it about the streets!" I also remembered I was a newspaper man and made a dash for the phone booth.

It was after one oclock and too late for the bulldog, but I could get a nice clean sweep in the morning editions. Then, as Norris, the night clerk was getting my number, I heard someone in the next booth calling Bellevue for an ambulance, and I knew it would be all over town by then. Anyway, I was on the ground floor, and when I'd finished giving the story to Rewrite, I got Mark Poli on the phone.

Mark was a homicide captain. His beat had once been the theatre district, and being an old friend of mine he'd try to keep the club out of the scandal as much as possible. The tabloids, of course, would make a Roman holiday out of it, and the club would be the Colosseum; the only difference would be their throwing lions to the Christians.

By the time I came out of the booth they had already taken Lou away, and the members were standing around uncertainly the way people do after an accident. But I knew this wasn't any accident. It had been deliberate, cold-blooded murder. Someone had called a cop and he was standing at the head of the stairs, looking as out of place as he would have in a Shakespearean tragedy.

The bar was doing a flourishing business. I helped it flourish a little more, and played detective, covertly watching the faces of my fellow members with the naive idea that their expressions would reveal the killer.

Dick Mann has gone over to the hospital with the ambulance, and as far as I could see there were no outward signs of guilt in the actions of the other Calder-haters. Curiously enough, Clint Saunders and Nevil Warton were standing in Lou's accustomed corner, but unconscious of it. Gordon Stone was at the opposite end of the bar, now calmly sipping a highball.

Gus was mixing drinks with his usual quiet efficiency as if nothing had happened. But I could have sworn I detected an air of triumph in his preoccupation, and I sud-

denly remembered his remark about his side of the bar having its advantages. All customers were at the mercy of a bartender, and certainly Lou, with his insults and condescension over the years, had given Gus enough provocation for revenge.

I felt sorry for him and when he served me my drink, I said sympathetically, "You'll probably be one of the suspects, Gus," and this time his answer was even more cryptic.

"I have already figured on that, Mr. Bidwell," he said.

III

WHEN MARK POLI arrived he didn't even ask me to introduce the different members. He told the uneasy group that it wasn't necessary for them to stay, but to please return at eleven in the morning.

They left with obvious relief, but I noticed that as they went upstairs, the cop stopped each one for a moment, evidently frisking them. I guess Mark decided he could get more information out of me alone.

After the last one had disappeared and the cop had motioned down that he hadn't found anything, Mark lit a cigarette and looked around with keen interest. "So this is the famous Thespis Club," he said a bit disdainfully. But there was awe in his voice too.

Mark had come up the hard way, from a flatfoot on a Brooklyn beat to the Times Square area where he had met a chorus girl and married her. The three kids they had had almost immediately had changed him from a lazy, good-natured patrolman into an ambitious, hard-working dick. He was still good-natured, but underneath as tough as the crooks he hunted.

I had always kidded him about his resemblance to Kirk Douglas, and he had voiced a disdainful opinion of most movie stars. But I knew he was tickled, especially after Kirk came out in 'Detective Story.'

"That guy would have made a good detective in real life," Mark had said. And when Kirk had come down to the club one night and I told him, he was just as tickled as Mark.

We were standing by the pool table and Mark rubbed the green cloth with reminiscent affection. "I was brought up on one of these," he said. "Got any sharks here?"

"Some of them even make a living at it," I told him, grinning, and introduced him to Norris, the night clerk.

Mark gave him a friendly smile and said, "You've got a ringside seat here, young fellow." His glance went from the desk to the stairs. "Do you keep track of the people coming in?"

Norris was already feeling his importance as a star witness, and motioned toward the upper hall. "No, sir· Murphy, the doorman does that. He has a board up there with the names of all the members on it, and he checks them in and out." He motioned over his shoulder to the switchboard. "When I get an incoming call I talk to Murph on the house phone, and if the member's in, Murph pages him."

Mark nodded, still looking toward the upper hall. "You can't see the front door from here," he said.

"No, sir. The stairs go down again to the front door. I can always see Mr. Calder though. That is, I can see his head, because he's so tall. I saw him coming in the first time," he added proudly. "And after the fight."

Mark looked at me and I said, "He had a fight with another member tonight, across the street in the park. We don't allow brawls here." I winked. "This is a gentlemen's club."

Mark was eyeing the stairs thoughtfully. "Then you couldn't have seen anyone else by the front door?" he asked Norris. "I mean, any strangers."

"What are you getting at?" I asked him.

"I stopped off at the hospital," Mark said. "Somebody gave Calder a strychnine mickey, and I wondered if any outsiders could have gotten in here without being seen."

"No, sir," Norris said firmly, "Murphy wouldn't let anyone inside unless he was a member, or someone calling for a member." Norris was right; Murphy had ruled the front door like a palace guard as long as I could remember.

"Is Murphy always on the door?"

"Yes, sir. That is, unless someone wants to go in the park. Murph has the key and lets them in." Norris' eyes suddenly widened. "He went across the street with Mr. Calder and Mr. Saunders tonight, but he came right back."

Mark smiled. "You mean he didn't stay to see the fight?"

"Oh, no, sir. Murphy doesn't believe in fighting."

Mark chuckled. "I never heard of an Irishman who didn't believe in fighting."

"He's very religious, sir," Norris said seriously.

We walked to the bar and I introduced Mark to Gus. "This is our real president, Mark. He's been keeping the members in line for forty years." I winked at Gus. "Be careful what you say, Gus. This is Mark Poli, the boy detective. Never lost a case."

"I never did either," Gus said drily, as he shook hands with Mark.

Mark gave him a knowing smile. "There were rumors that

this bar was open all during prohibition."

"We kept a little on hand for medicinal purposes," Gus said solemnly. "Would you care for a drink, captain?"

"I sure would." Mark shook his head with a grimace at me. "But I'd better not. Bill here has handed me a nice inside job. How many members are there?" he asked me.

"Around twelve hundred, but only about two hundred active."

He grunted wryly. "Two hundred suspects, and most of 'em actors." He gazed around with reluctant admiration. "Bet you fellows have a lot of fun in this rumpus rooom."

"Yeah," I said, "Lou Calder thought he'd die laughing tonight."

Mark gave me a pained look and said, "Where was Calder when he got it?"

I pointed to the end of the bar and told him how it was Lou's favorite corner, and how he stood there every night. "If anyone was there when he came in, they got out of the way fast. He had a poisonous tongue."

"Those who live by the sword—" Gus smiled quietly.

He didn't finish the quotation and Mark gave him a rather surprised look. "Calder must have been quite a character," he said.

"He was three characters," I said, "Mephistopheles, Bacchus, and Casanova." I motioned toward the empty cocktail glass still on the bar. "That was his last drink."

Mark eyed it with sudden interest, and wrapping it up in a bar paper napkin, he went to the foot of the stairs and handed it to the cop. "Send this over to fingerprint," he told him.

When he came back I said, "What's the idea? You don't have to touch a glass to drop poison in it."

He grinned. "Who's the boy detective now? If someone else's fingerprints were on it, it might provide a lead." He turned and said, "How'd you get along with him, Gus?"

Gus seemed to hesitate an instant before replying. "He wasn't so bad until he got drunk, and then the members stayed away from him."

"That must have been difficult for you."

Gus smiled. "It was part of my job, captain."

"He means Jobe," I said sympathetically. "If I'd been Gus I'd have slipped a mickey in his drink long ago."

I was sorry the minute I said it, and I caught the reproach in Gus' eyes. But he continued to look at Mark with the same patient smile. "I don't mind admitting I was often tempted to poison Mr. Calder. But I had nothing to do with tonight's tragedy."

"You couldn't have picked a better spot," Mark said a bit grimly. "With a roomful of suspects."

Gus gave another shrug. "It was that way every night, captain. And I wouldn't want to kill a man after I'd invested money in his play." He saw Mark's look of inquiry. "I put five thousand dollars in that show that opened tonight."

"Yes, but you put it in when Nevil Warton was the star," I said without thinking.

"Perhaps Mr. Warton will be the star again," Gus said quietly.

Mark was looking around the room. "Who did Calder fight tonight?" he asked me.

"Clint Saunders, a young actor," I told him. "His wife's in the same play, and I guess Lou's been making passes at her. Anyway, that was the gossip, and Clint finally challenged Calder to a fight."

"What happened?"

"It was a TKO in the second round, according to reports. Clint's a lightweight and didn't have a chance. But when Lou started hinting about there being plenty of white meat in the show it was too much for him. The fight should have been stopped, but nobody did anything about it.'

"What's going to happen to the play now?" Mark asked.

"Maybe, as Gus says, Warton will take over. The show's been jinxed from the start, even before it came to town. Warton had the lead originally on the road, but he had a run-in with the stage director and quit, and Calder was called in to take his place."

"Was Warton one of the men here tonight?"

I nodded grimly. "He was not only here, but he had just called Lou a rotten swine, and was about to fight him, when Lou took his dive. They're long time enemies. They had a real Pier Six brawl a couple of months ago."

"Nice social little club," Mark commented, then shook his head, eyeing me sourly. "You sure handed me a closed case. Private, for members only."

"That's why I called you," I said, grinning. "We'd like to keep it as private as possible."

Mark grunted in disgust. "Lou Calder's bigger news than the election." He looked around again grimly. "Well, I guess there's nothing more we can do until I get the autopsy. See you in the morning." He turned as he went out. "Say, are you a suspect?"

I hung my head. "You've got me, officer. News has been pretty slow. I killed him so I could get a story."

IV

I HAD A nightcap with Gus while he was closing up the bar. Then I laid down on one of the red, leather-cushioned benches, and when I woke up the char-

women were cleaning the floor beside me. I heard one of them whisper, "Careful, dearie," and the other one said, "Oh, I always sweep *around* the members."

After I took a shower, I treated myself to a good breakfast in the upstairs dining room, and read the papers. It was of course splashed all over the front page. My account simply said Calder had met his death in an actor's club. But the other sheets, just as I had anticipated, were already having a ball throwing lions to the Christians. One of the tabloid boys really went to town: "Great Lover Slain in Womanless Eden," he headlined his story. "Who is the poisonous snake in the famous Thespis Club, esoteric center of culture and the Seven Deadly Arts?"

Mark Poli was just coming in the front door when I came downstairs to the lobby, and he looked as if he hadn't had any sleep at all. "It was strychnine all right," he said. "And there were several sets of fingerprints on that glass."

"So what?" I yawned. "I told you last night you didn't have to touch a glass to drop poison in it."

"So my fingerprint man is going to take samples this morning."

Mark pointed to a cop carrying a flat box, and a plainclothes man he introduced as Connors, his assistant. Connors was a tall, lean individual who looked more like an undertaker than a detective. He had a build like Lou Calder, but he was no glamor boy.

While we were talking Walter Hartwick, our president, came down from the dining room and we went on down into the grill where Gus was just opening up the bar.

Walter smiled with pontifical martyrdom when I introduced Mark to him, and said, "This is indeed a tragic affair, captain. I know it will be difficult, but whatever you can do to keep the club from any unpleasant notoriety will be deeply appreciated." He made a gently disapproving gesture around the dim room. "After all, the downstairs represents only a small part of the Thespis. Our membership includes many highly respected citizens. Judges, college professors—even two ministers of the gospel."

Mark gave me a little wink and smiled politely. "I understand, Mr. Hartwick, but even your Shakespeare said, 'Murder will out,' and you can't rule out anyone as a homicide suspect."

Hartwick didn't even get it, and was smiling benignly at the members who began straggling in, all obviously ill at ease, especially after having been stopped at the door and asked if they were willing to be fingerprinted. Some went directly to the bar, but most of the men stood around uncertainly while Mark used the end of the black canvas-covered pool table

for a desk, with Connors beside him to take notes.

Clint Saunders still showed signs of his beating, and was so nervous I felt sorry for him. Nevil Warton glared around, openly truculent, and it was then that I noticed that Gordon Stone hadn't appeared. Counting the house, I told Mark that Stone was the only one absent.

Mark decided to go ahead with the inquiry anyway, so I called out, "You can relax, boys. I'm the only member of the press here, and this gent is Captain Mark Poli of the Police Department, and a good friend of mine. So we can keep this nice and homey."

There were strained smiles, and I said, "Mark thought it would give him a better picture if you all took the same places where you were last night during the festivities."

As they all moved slowly and reluctantly into position, I added, "Mark also suggests that when you leave, it wouldn't be a bad idea to restrain our histrionic talents. In other words," I added, grinning, "keep your big mouths shut for the sake of old Thespis."

I could see Mark studying the faces around the room, and he said, "I'll try not to keep you long, gentlemen, and if any of you prefer waiting until you have talked to your lawyers—" He let the sentence hang, and then his eyes went to Clint Saunders.

Clint said tightly, "I suppose I get top billing, captain."

Mark gave him a sympathetic smile. Clint's face was drawn and pale, and the bruises showed up even more than they had the night before. "I'm afraid so, Mr. Saunders."

Mark glanced at his notes, and for a moment I thought he was going to question Clint about the rumored romance of his wife. But he just said, "You fought with the deceased just before he was poisoned, and your fingerprints were on the glass that Calder drank from."

"You'll find them on his neck too," Clint said in a tense voice.

Mark turned to Dick Mann. "I understand, doctor, that it was you who diagnosed Calder's death as resulting from strychnine?" Dick nodded and Mark said, "You are a practicing physician as well as a psychiatrist?"

Dick simply nodded again and Mark asked, "Why did you think it was strychnine?"

"Calder showed all the symptoms. Convulsions, grabbing at the back of his neck, and his mouth and the empty glass had a bitter odor."

"Then you examined the glass?"

"Naturally," Dick replied patiently, "He had just finished the drink when he collapsed."

It was Mark's turn to nod. "I see. That's why your fingerprints were on the glass. Doctor, in your

medical practise, do you ever prescribe strychnine?"

"Occasionally," Dick told him. "For heart ailments, nervous diseases, post-diptheria, and—" he seemed to hesitate —"for acute-alcoholism."

Mark picked that up fast. "Had you ever prescribed it for Calder?"

"Yes, but in minute quantities."

"Would that make him more immune to the poison?"

Dick shook his head. "The amount I prescribed was too small for that, even though it's a cumulative drug."

Mark asked, "How long does it usually take for strychnine to cause death?"

"That would depend on the individual. In some cases, death is almost instantaneous. In others, the victim recovers temporarily from the first convulsion, and there may be a short lapse of time between the first seizure and the last."

"What if the man were drunk?"

"The resistance might be a little stronger, but the result would be the same. As I said, it all depends on the chemical make-up of the individual."

Mark hesitated, and I knew what he was going to say. "Doctor, you had a slight disagreement with Calder last night, didn't you?"

Dick smiled, but it wasn't his usual gentle smile. "I wouldn't call it a disagreement, captain. Calder referred to me as a medical quack. If I had been a quack, I'd have sailed into him. But a physician's first duty is to heal, not to make the patient even more gravely ill."

There was sincere admiration in Mark's eyes, and he said apologetically, "I agree with you, doctor." He smiled grimly and motioned toward his notes. "It seems Calder had quite a few enemies, and I'm merely trying to sift them out."

Dick's voice was low, but there were years of medical forbearance in back of it. "Captain, if I poisoned every man who resented the solicitude of a physician—and every one does at times—there wouldn't be many left." The gentle smile came back again. "I have prescribed strychnine for two other members here, but the amount of poison in such a prescription isn't enough to be harmful."

"Suppose the amount in the prescription were altered?"

"I see what you are getting at, captain," Dick said drily, "And if you insist, I can give you the names of the other members I have treated. As for altering a prescription, any reputable druggist would notice the discrepancy in the amount of strychnine."

Mark gave up that angle with obvious reluctance and turned to

Nevil Warton. "Mr. Warton, I understand you and Calder weren't exactly friends."

Warton's ruddy face was flushed with anger. "I suppose you've been told of the fight we had. I'm sorry I didn't kill him then."

"May I ask what the fight was about?"

"You may not," Warton said bluntly.

There was an uneasy lull as Mark consulted his notes, then he looked around slowly. "According to these reports, nearly all of you went to the bar at one time or another, prior to Calder's death, and would have had an opportunity to poison his drink."

His glance went to Gus, and he said almost casually, "Gus, I see you use rat poison around the bar. I believe some of the mixtures contain strychnine but I may be mistaken."

"This is a very old building, captain." Gus smiled and pointed to the glass-covered cheese tray on the bar. "And the cheese attracts mice."

Mark nodded and after a moment's hesitation, turned to Clint Saunders with obvious reluctance. "Mr. Saunders, I'm afraid you had the strongest motive of all, because of your wife's association with Calder."

Clint was standing by the foot of the stairs, and I could see the muscles in his thin face twitch as he made an effort to control his emotions. He straightened up, his eyes burning with resentment. Then he made a sudden despairing gesture, and his voice was taut with bitterness.

"Yes, I had a motive, captain," he said. "And there is something you haven't heard, but you undoubtedly will, so I might as well tell you now." His face was ashen as he blurted it out. "I have been on the road for six months and just returned—and my wife is pregnant."

He turned away, unable to keep the tears back, and at that dramatic moment Gordon Stone appeared at the head of the stairs. He stood rigid, like one of his own statues, and he was not only stiff drunk, but to add to the grotesquerie, he carried under one arm a life-size bust of himself. The plaster had been tinted so that it was actually lifelike and gave the weird impression that he was carrying his own head.

V

THERE WAS A dead silence as Stone came down the steps a bit unsteadily and paused, his face twisted in a sardonic grimace. "Pardon me for being late, gentlemen. I've been celebrating!"

His glittering eyes focused on Mark Poli. When I introduced him, he moved to the pool table, carefully placing the bust on the

end of it, and looked at Mark with a frozen smile. "Captain, do you believe there is such a thing as a perfect crime?"

Mark was staring at the bust, just as startled as the others. But he caught himself up quickly and said in a perfectly calm tone: "There haven't been many, Mr. Stone."

Stone patted the head of the bust, that frozen smile still on his face. "Well, I planned one! And this was my alibi! A striking likeness, isn't it?"

Mark nodded and Stone motioned over his shoulder with a jerky gesture. "My house is one of the historic landmarks on this park, captain, and was designed by Stanford White, another murder victim." There was a gleam of madness in his glittering eyes now. "My studio is on the top floor. As you may have learned, I have been working on a bust of Calder. He was reluctant to pose at first, because he was once married to my wife. But I induced him to do it by telling him it was for the new theatrical hall of fame the club has started."

He patted the bust again and leaned forward, unmindful of the staring faces around him. "It was part of my plan for the perfect crime, captain. *American Homes Magazine* has been wanting to take pictures of my house for some time, so I arranged for their photographers to come down on a day I knew Calder would be posing in my studio."

He paused and there was an expectant hush as Mark said, "Go on, Mr. Stone."

Stone's eyes had a malevolent glitter, and you could see he was reliving the whole thing in his inflamed mind as he went on: "While Calder was in my studio, I was going to place this bust of me in a downstairs window, with a newspaper propped up in front of it, so that from the outside it would look as if I was sitting there reading. Then, while the photographers were taking pictures of the house from across the street, I was going to knock Calder unconscious and push his body out the studio window!"

Stone's smile was like a gargoyle's. "The perfect crime, captain, because I would have photographic evidence that at the moment Calder fell to his death, I was sitting in my downstairs window. And my story would be that I had left Calder in the studio talking to my wife!"

The frozen smile disappeared and Stone's face was contorted with sudden rage. "The perfect crime—ruined by a blundering killer!" He swung a clenched fist toward the stairs. "The magazine photographers are coming down to take pictures of my house *this afternoon!*"

He glared at the men around him in hysterical accusation. "I

wanted to kill that bastard with my bare hands!"

Swinging around in a mad fury, Stone picked up the bust and hurled it with violence to the floor. There was a splintering crash and the bust ceased to resemble the man who made it.

There wasn't a sound as Stone stood staring down at the jagged fragments of plaster on the tile floor. Then he turned and stalked up the stairs, and Mark made no move to stop him.

He said something to Connors, who went toward the phone booths, and got up with an almost weary gesture. "I won't keep you any longer, gentlemen. Thank you for coming down."

They started filing out, glancing uneasily at the debris on the floor, and Mark added with a meaningful nod in my direction, "As Bidwell says, it would be just as well if none of you talked to the press. I know you all want to keep the club out of it as much as possible."

A few of the members lingered, returning to the bar, but they unconsciously avoided Lou's corner. I said to Mark, "Come on, you need a drink."

He smiled wryly, and as we moved to Lou's vacant space at the end of the bar, he said, "What a cast for a homicide case! All actors!" He nodded to Gus. "A little bourbon, Gus, and no poison, please."

Gus didn't seem to appreciate the humor, for his face was expressionless when he turned to mix the drinks. I said to Mark, "Do you think Stone really planned a perfect crime as he boasted just now?"

Mark frowned and motioned toward the phone booths. "Connors is checking with the magazine. We'll soon know."

"Stone's no actor," I reminded him. "That was some performance he put on though. I never saw him drunk before. It gave me the creeps."

"Did you know him well?"

I shook my head. "Nobody knew the man well. He was as uncommunicative as his sculpture. I think he married Calder's ex-wife just because she had money."

I suddenly remembered how Stone had looked standing near Calder's cocktail as he was getting a glass of water, and his violent trembling when the fighters had returned from the park, and I told Mark about it.

He was watching a waiter sweeping up the fragments of plaster. "A man clever enough to plan a crime like that might have another up his sleeve," he said. "Maybe he wasn't as drunk as he pretended to be. That act might have been put on to divert suspicion from him."

We saw Connors come out of the booth and nod, and Mark add-

ed grimly, "It looks as if it wasn't just an act either."

He gave a shrug of resignation. "I've already got men running down strychnine leads, but if there's a crooked druggist mixed up in it, it's going to be even tougher."

Mark beckoned to Connors and said, "Better start getting a line on the druggists in this neighborhood. We may have to widen the search later, so let's hope there aren't too many of them."

As Connors went out, Murphy, the doorman came up from the basement. He had evidently slept down there because he was still in his uniform, and he approached Mark with obvious hesitation. Murphy was a cadaverous-looking Irishman in his late sixties, with the ascetic face of a friar.

"You wanted to see me, captain? I told you everything I knew last night," he added a bit resentfully.

Mark smiled. "I thought we might have overlooked something, Murphy. What did you think of Calder?"

Murphy's washed-out blue eyes lit up with a surprising warmth, and his answer was just as surprising. "A fine gentlemen," he said. "I know the other members didn't like him, but he was always nice to me and very generous. Many's the time he's given me a five-spot when I put him in a cab. And he and Doctor Mann got my daughter Mary in the show he was starring in."

He looked at me anxiously. "What will happen now, Mr. Bidwell? Will they close the play? My daughter's all upset. It was her first job in the theatre."

"Wharton's going on in Calder's place tonight, Murph."

Murphy almost beamed. "She'll be glad. She liked Mr. Wharton. She felt bad when he left the show on the road."

"Did you honestly like Warton?" Mark asked him.

He hesitated, then shook his head. "I can't say I did. He was nasty with the help. And he was a dirty fighter," he added impulsively.

Mark smiled, remembering what Norris had told him about Murphy's not believing in fighting. "You saw the fight between Warton and Calder?"

Murphy nodded. "It was late at night and I was just going home when they came upstairs, and I let them in the park." He shook his head in shocked remembrance. "They'd both been drinking, and they even tried to fight here in the club. But Gus made them go outside."

Mark looked at Gus. "What was the fight about, Gus?"

Mr. Calder was teasing Mr. Warton about his not being popular with women," Gus said, with an amused smile. "That night they were the only ones left at the

bar, and they were arm wrestling. All the time, Mr. Calder was taunting him, and when he got Mr. Warton's arm down, he seemed to go crazy. He picked up that silver pitcher and would have hit Mr. Calder if I hadn't grabbed him. After that they went out. I guess Murphy's the only one who saw the fight."

"Who got the best of it?" Mark asked.

"Neither of them," Murphy said in an awed voice. "They must have fought for over half an hour, and Mr. Warton didn't stop at nothing. Once he got Mr. Calder down on the ground he tried to blind him with a handful of gravel. And all the time Mr. Calder was laughing with that crazy laugh of his. I became scared and ran to find a cop, but when we got back they'd gone. We could see a trail of blood spots on the sidewalk going toward Third Avenue, and the cop figured they'd gone down to one of the hospitals, so I went on home."

Murphy looked at Gus in righteous condemnation. "That's what comes from drinking. This is a fine club with fine gentlemen—except when they take to heavy drinking."

Mark smiled sympathetically and said, "Thanks, Murphy, I guess that's all." But his eyes followed the doorman thoughtfully as he left.

"Murphy's a converted drinker," Gus sighed. "And they're worse than the Prohibitionists used to be. How long ago that seems."

Mark chuckled in agreement, and I saw him looking at a framed poem on the wall beside him. It was a parody on the visiting English actors, called, "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere," and I told Mark that one of our minor poetic wags had written it, and how our actors resented the British invasion.

He grinned. "Do the boys gather here every night?"

"Evening performances every day except Sunday," I said, nodding. I caught a gleam in his eye. "You act like a man with an idea."

"It's more of an idea for an act. The play's the thing to try the conscience of a king," he quoted. "Ever see that TV show, 'Masquerade Party'?"

"Sure. What about it?"

"They do some clever things with plastic masks of well-known people. If I remember correctly, not long ago they had an actress dressed as a man and wearing a Lou Calder mask."

"So?"

"So suppose Lou Calder were to walk down those stairs at midnight, the same as he did last night?"

"Banquo's ghost, eh?" I grinned.

"And maybe bingo," he said.

He thanked Gus for the drink

and winked at me as he left. "See you on the midnight ride."

After I'd had a nooncap with Gus, I went back to the office. As I was writing a story from the Lucretia Borgia angle reminding my faithful readers that it was her brother Caesar who was the real snake-in-the-grass, the boss dropped in and said, "Well, what goes with the esoteric garment center?"

"Consult your morning newspaper," I told him. "And don't beef if I have to spend a lot of money on rye-on-the-rocks."

"What's *new?*" he asked with withering sarcasm, and I retorted, "It's as old as Cain and Abel, and hold a couple of columns open on the front page. I think Mark Poli may break the case tonight."

VI

JUST OUT OF curiosity, I bought a standee ticket for Calder's play, and as a result of the publicity the house was packed, and I had to admit that Warton was great. He gave the role of an aging Casanova a sensitive, bitter pathos that Calder never would have thought of, and for some reason it made me think of Clint Saunders, and how a sensitive, physically weak man didn't have a chance against a herd-riding Philistine.

I could imagine how Calder had played the part, like a brawny extrovert, which he was. Warton gave it a sort of frustrated Samson quality that made it almost a sympathetic character. The only thing that marred the performance was a walk-on maid who fainted in the last act, and Warton even carried that off—and her—with clever ad-libbing, and I wondered idly if it might be Murphy's daughter.

I experienced a shock when I came out of the theatre and stopped to get the papers. The newsstand was in front of a movie house that was already featuring one of Lou's old pictures, and the title of it was, "Last Encore."

Going down in the cab I skimmed through the news and was relieved to see that the scene of the murder had been temporarily forgotten. The papers were playing up Calder's love life, and one of the tabloids was running a serialized biography of the Great Lover. The only reference to the club was a poem that headed one of the gossip columns and started off with, "A bunch of the boys were hitting it up in the Thespis Club saloon when a big bad wolf named Lou walked in."

When I walked in, the club was crowded, but it was more like a wake than the usual after-theatre relaxation. There was the same tenseness in the air that I'd noticed the night before. Mark Poli hadn't shown up yet, so I went to the end to the bar and kept my radar ear open for possible news items.

A group of actors near me were playing a desultory match game,

and I was surprised when Walter Hartwick, our president, joined me at the bar, his benign manner clouded by a pontifical frown.

"I must confess," he said, "that I don't quite know what to say at the burial service tomorrow, considering the circumstances."

I grinned. "Why don't you give them an 'Alas, Poor Yorick?' Or why not tell the truth?" I asked bluntly. "That's what a man's epitaph should be, not a mummer's mask."

Hartwick eyed me with patient reproach. "I'm thinking of the club, Bidwell. After all, we have a great tradition to uphold."

"Tradition, my foot," I said. "Tradition is nothing but hand-me-down manners and customs that are as dead as your own unique Shakespeare. And what have actors ever handed down? Nothing but the echoes of someone else's brilliant dialogue."

Hartwick turned away with benign but histrionic dignity. "I'm afraid you've been drinking."

"I'm afraid I'm just starting," I said. I was sick of pontifical hams who after they memorize Shakespeare's lines begin to think they wrote them, and then I heard Brooks West, the columnist, at a nearby table, holding forth with his usual Schopenhauerish spleen, and I couldn't help but think that a good many writers are just as big hams as actors.

"The theatrical profession," he proclaimed, "has degenerated into a three-ring circus, and the smut magazines are reaping the harvest."

"Three cheers for good old harvest," I interrupted.

West ignored me as he always did; I was just a cheap reporter. "The profession today is composed of third-rate talent, and publicity hounds who are already trying to cash in on Calder's murder. They're either involved in drunken brawls or cheap scandals, and the moronic public eats it up."

"You're syndicated in five hundred papers, aren't you?" I said as I passed his table on the way to the desk.

As I put in a call for Mark I saw Clint Saunders in one of the booths, his pale face in darkness from the overhead light. I could see the torment in his eyes as he listened to someone at the other end of the wire. When he came out he joined Gene Justin, a refugee actor from Hollywood.

Gene said sympathetically, "Was that the wife?" Clint nodded, and Gene looked at him with an understanding smile. "You know I was in a movie with her once, Clint. I thought she was one of the swellest kids I ever met." He put a hand on Clint's shoulder. "Acting's a funny business. The better you are at it, the more apt you are to be carried away by it, by the romance and the glamor of

the play you're in, especially if you're young."

Clint didn't seem to be listening, but he nodded, and Gene said, "That's the trouble with even the older actors. We don't leave our emotions in the theatre like a business man does when he leaves his office." He grinned, "We look down on those guys because we think we're artists. But perhaps they're the sensible ones. We work at it twenty-four hours a day, and some of us live the character we're playing offstage as well as on."

He shook his head and took a sip of his highball. "I was married to a gal like that. She was in a picture with a famous star, and before they were halfway through the shooting, she thought she was in love with him. She was pretty young, so she didn't realize it was the part she was playing." He smiled reminiscently. "You really can't blame 'em, Clint."

I saw Clint look at him, his face drawn with bitterness, but he knew what Gene was trying to say and smiled wanly. "What happened to her, Gene?"

Gene chuckled. "She's home with the kids. We've been married twenty years now."

Clint looked toward the phone booth and I could see the love and forgiveness in his eyes. "She wants me to come home," he said in a low voice. He started for the booth, then stopped and smiled at Gene gratefully. "Thanks, Gene."

Norris at the switchboard was still trying to locate Mark when I saw him coming down the stairs. As he did a waiter with a tray came through the door next to the foot of the stairs, and I saw Mark hold a whispered conversation with him. The waiter nodded, and as he left, I turned to Mark.

"Haven't you had dinner yet?" I asked him.

I sensed the excitement in his voice when he grinned. "I just ordered some sound effects, not food."

I could see his sharp eyes studying the different members when we went to the corner of the bar. He said in a guarded tone, "I've been doing some outside work, and I think this is going to be a surprise party instead of a masquerade party."

"What's the idea?" I asked, catching his excitement.

He winked. "What do you want to do, spoil my big moment? There's plenty of ham in me too."

You could feel the change in the atmosphere the minute the members became aware of Mark's presence. They unconsciously lowered their conversations and began drifting away from the bar to the tables in the middle of the room.

I caught a gleam of satisaction in Mark's understanding smile. He didn't say anything while Gus was serving us, and for the first time I thought I saw fear in the latter's

eyes when he looked at Mark. His hands trembled as he put the glasses down in front of us.

Mark was still smiling, but his voice had a sudden hard quality. He said, "Gus, it's none of my business if you make book here, but when you told me you'd put money in Calder's play, why didn't you tell me he was into you for several thousand dollars on racing bets?"

Gus' face was expressionless except for a thin smile. "Someone must have misinformed you, captain, I don't take bets of any kind. One of the waiters may be doing it, but I wouldn't know about that. As for the money that Calder owed me—it was a personal loan."

I knew he was lying because I'd been placing bets with him for two years, but I suddenly felt sorry for him. "You don't have to worry about Mark, Gus," I said.

The look he gave me was a long, cryptic look. "I'm not worrying, Mr. Bidwell." He turned and went deliberately to the other end of the bar.

Mark shook his head. "There's a guy with murder in his heart if I ever saw one. It's a wonder you all haven't been poisoned."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

He smiled grimly, with a motion around the room. "What effect do you think this place would have on any young man who came to America dreaming about the promised land, and found himself trapped in an exclusive club? Gus not only found he was just another servant. He found he had a hundred masters instead of one, and a good many of them were in debt to him, and he couldn't collect?"

I just couldn't believe it. "Are you sure?" I asked.

He nodded. "You know that bar of his uptown? It's a gold mine. But all the money he's been making up there he's been losing here, backing shows and letting the betters get into him, and there's nothing he can do about it." He nodded thoughtfully. "This is a high-class club, as I've said. The only way Gus could get even—"

He nudged me and pointed to the waiter he'd talked to. The man has just come through the kitchen door with a loaded tray, and was standing uncertainly by the foot of the stairs as if he didn't know which table had ordered. Then I saw him deliberately drop the tray, and when it landed on the floor with a crash, everybody in the room turned to look.

At that moment Lou Calder came down the grand stairway, pausing theatrically halfway down as he always did.

I found myself staring with the others, forgetting for the moment Mark's masquerade party, until I saw him intently watching the reactions of the other members.

There was a stunned silence, and as I realized it was Connors, his assistant, wearing a Calder mask, he took it off and nodded at Mark with a meaningful gesture over his shoulder.

There were shocked murmurs of indignation when the members realized it was a hoax, and Mark held up his hands with an apologetic but grim smile. "I hope you'll excuse me, gentlemen, for this amateur performance. But it seems to have made a hit."

Walter Hartwick, who had been about to go upstairs, glared at Mark, his benign pose forgotten. "It was in poor taste to say the least, captain!"

I glanced around and saw Gordon Stone rising jerkily from a table, knocking over the chair behind him. He was still staring at the stairway, his features frozen in a guilty grimace. Nevil Warton was angrily exclaiming. "It's a damned outrage!" and Clint Saunders' face was twisted in an agony of remorse. When I looked toward the bar I saw that Gus had disappeared!

Mark was still smiling, but there was a curious contempt in his voice. "I think you can consider yourselves, and the club quite fortunate, gentlemen. Mr. Calder wasn't murdered by a member, but by Murphy, your doorman. He fainted when he thought he saw Calder walk into the club just now, but he has been revived and has confessed. His daughter had only a small walk-on part in Calder's play, but quite a big part in his private life."

Mark was a ham, all right. He paused with perfect timing. "She is pregnant, and when her father found it out—"

All eyes followed Mark as he walked to the end of the bar and stood next to the framed poem on the wall. "Murphy knew Calder stood in this same spot every night, and he also knew—" he took the picture off the wall, revealing a small hole that had been behind it— "that a wiring pipe once led from here, through the narrow wall, to the lobby upstairs.

"It came out under the mailbox there. The ends had been sealed up with plaster, but Murphy reopened the passage and it was a simple matter for him to insert a glass straw and drop the poison in Calder's cocktail while the boys were in the park fighting."

Mark glanced toward Dick Mann with a sympathetic smile. "Doctor Mann had prescribed strychnine for Murphy for a heart ailment, and that was how Murphy got the poison, from a careless druggist."

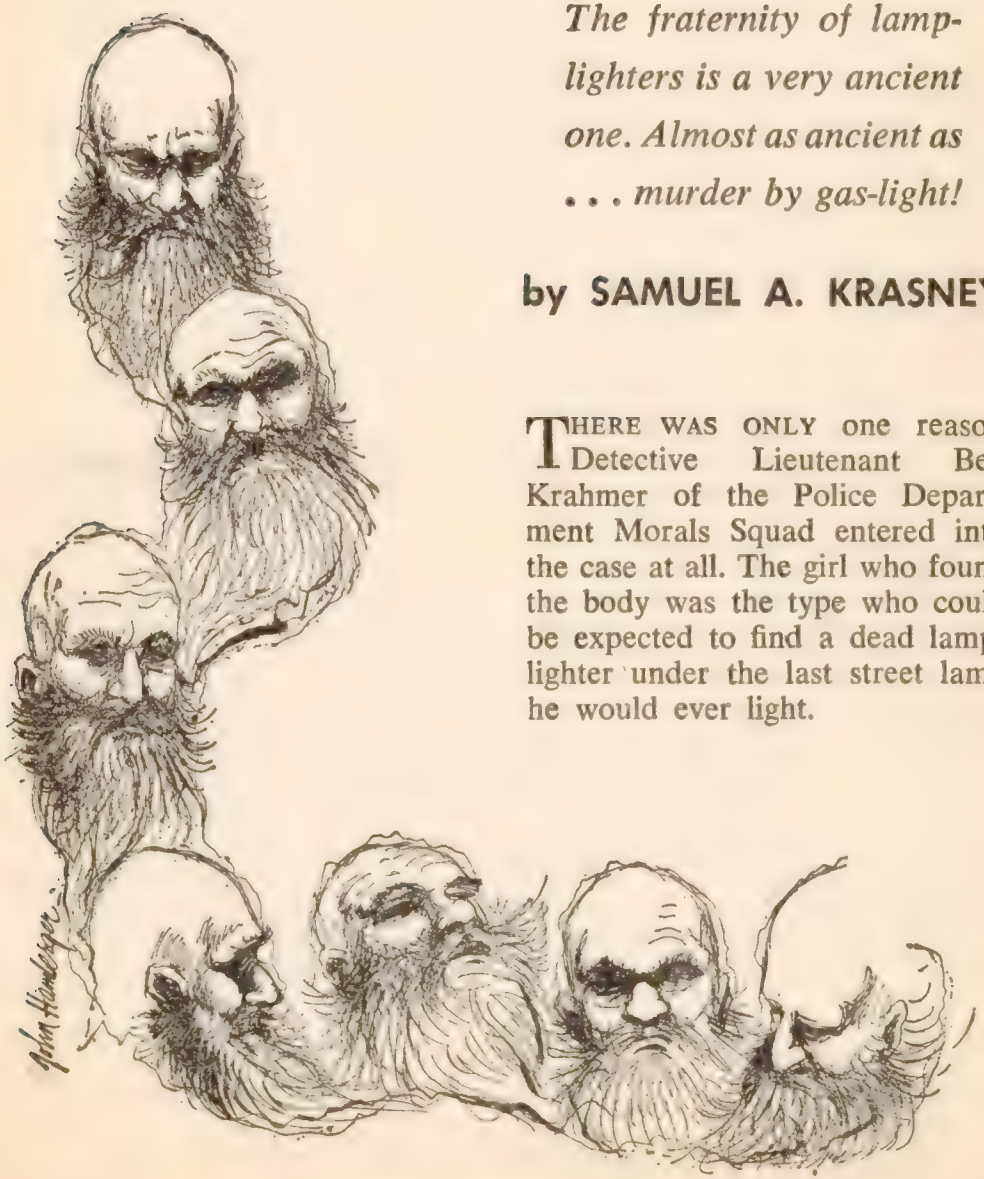
"It's simply incredible," Walter Hartwick murmured.

"Most murders are, Mr. Hartwick," Mark Poli agreed drily, "almost as incredible as an actor assassinating a President of the United States."

Make Room For a Lamplighter

The fraternity of lamplighters is a very ancient one. Almost as ancient as . . . murder by gas-light!

by SAMUEL A. KRASNEY



THERE WAS ONLY one reason Detective Lieutenant Ben Krahmer of the Police Department Morals Squad entered into the case at all. The girl who found the body was the type who could be expected to find a dead lamplighter under the last street lamp he would ever light.

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Marcia Coe was her name. Panhandler and dancer at stag affairs where the rising smoke was thick enough to hide the over-fat contours of her body as she gyrated slowly around the stage. B-girl when she could find a joint low enough to risk its license for the few extra bucks that might accrue to it from her steering.

Marcia was on her way to work that evening. She walked down the steps of the sagging ancient brownstone that was home and saw the little man leaning against the lamppost. This was in one of the old neighborhoods of Philadelphia where crooked streets are too narrow for a modern car to pass though. The side-walks are made of bricks laid end to end and the houses lean back into the past, hiding from the progress that has outgrown them for a half century or more.

Only a few sections are left in the city where the old street lamps still stand in a throwback to gaslight days. Their mantles are of spider-web thinness, and need a man carrying a pilot light on the end of a long thin tube to start them glowing at night. The men who did this job were bent-backed gnomes who looked as old as the lamps they lit.

Marcia smiled at the gnome under the lamppost, for he was the gnome who came dutifully along her block at dusk each day. She gave him a little wave. But he didn't answer. She wondered if he was sick.

As she told Krahmer later, "I thought he had a stomach ache or somethin', bein' so old and all. So I walked over to touch him and asked, 'What's the matter?' He didn't answer, but he started to turn, leanin' out a little bit and then comin' back, and then he was slidin' down. But he didn't fall. And then I seen why. His necktie was tied around the lamppost. But he was dead all right. He was croaked."

Krahmer had gotten the call because Marcia, while she had a nodding acquaintance with many members of the Philadelphia Police force, knew the men of the Morals Squad best. They'd picked her up so many times they were like old friends.

It was a quiet night in Morals, with Policewoman Zella McKenzie doing some knitting at her desk, and Lieutenant Ben Krahmer and Hal Uritz, his driver, playing two-handed gin. At 5:35 the call came in from the Coe woman and her garbled message finally was straightened into intelligibility. She was told to wait and not touch anything. Then a call was put through to Police Telegraph, Homicide was notified, and the wheels within wheels that make up the mills of justice had started to turn.

Ben Krahmer really had no right being in the case. It was a

murder and belonged to Homicide, as Lieutenant Frank Neary, the Homicide man assigned, lost no time in reminding him.

"I know," admitted Ben, standing beside Neary on the sidewalk and watching the mobile lab crew working on the skinny, atrophied-looking body of the dead man.

The two officers were a lot alike in appearance. Wide-shouldered, craggy-faced, crew cut hair. The difference was mainly in the expression around their eyes. Krahmer's eyes twinkled as though he enjoyed his job and its ironies. Neary glared at suspects as though their guilt could be taken for granted.

"Sure Frank, I know it's yours," Krahmer said again. "But what the hell! I have a sort of responsible feeling for Marcia. My boys have arrested her so much I don't think either one of us would feel right if she was interviewed by a stranger like you. Besides," he added quietly, "she's an inveterate liar. But I know when she's lying."

Neary didn't believe it, until he started questioning Marcia and found that she gave him three completely different versions within the space of the first ten minutes. Then he threw up his big, square boned hands and deferred to the Morals man. Ben came forward, talked to her in quiet tones, shook his head chidingly whenever she started to deviate from the truth and, finally, got the story.

Marcia had awakened at five p.m. as she did every night. At this time of the year the lamp lights came on twenty minutes later. She had walked out of the house at five-thirty and found the old man dead. If she hadn't lived on this street for ten years and gotten to know the old man well, she would have thought he was a drunk resting against the lamp-post and ignored him like so many others must have done.

There was no sense in holding Marcia. She knew nothing about the killing. So they left her go.

"Stay out of action," Ben suggested. "Don't get arrested tonight."

She agreed, said she was going to have something to eat and then come back in to watch television with her landlady. Then Marcia Coe started down the street in a hip-swinging motion that had been worth watching twenty years ago, but now only looked like a loaded gravel-dumping truck going over a rocky road.

Krahmer and Neary went through the effects of the dead man spread out on enamel trays in the police laboratory. John Sebastian Stoner, sixty-four years old, an employee of the City's Department of Water and Gas, his identification card stated. Only that and his address. They found nothing at the address except a

small, closet-like bare room and a few articles of clothing.

The landlady told them old Mister Stoner had no close relatives. "No kith nor kin," the fat, husky-voiced, sweating woman said. "Poor man, his only friends were the others like him. All seven of them."

The two detectives were puzzled. "Seven?" asked Ben. "What 'others' are you talking about?"

"Lamplighters," she answered. "To see them together was like watching a meeting of the leprechauns. All humpbacked and shriveled up they were. They got together every few nights or so. I swear, it's like a family that's very old when you see them, they look so much alike."

Neary seemed bewildered and Krahmer thanked her. Between the two of them they took whatever effects they found in the bare, monastic room back with them to Police Headquarters.

After they received the Medical Examiner's preliminary report and found out that the old man had been killed by an ice pick driven with violence through his heart, the detectives went downstairs to the coffee shop on the corner.

"What do you think, Ben?" asked Neary. "There's nothing on the street, no witnesses. Nobody saw anything. The murder weapon's missing. Figure it was a stab and grab? Maybe somebody thought he had some dough on him."

Krahmer didn't know, and said as much. He thought they should check with the lamplighters, to see if the other members of the fraternity had any ideas. Neary chided Krahmer for trying to act like a mystery fiction detective, but the Morals Squad man went stubbornly ahead and phoned the City's Department of Water and Gas.

No one was there so late at night except a switchboard man who sounded sleepy. He told the Lieutenant that the lamplighters were under the charge of Edward J. Cordi, Assistant Director of Water and Gas. After some slight difficulty Krahmer got the Assistant Director's home phone number.

Cordi sounded very surprised when he received the call. "Dead? Good God! Dead, you say? Who? Old Stoner! I'm damned sorry. But hell, at his age he could go at any time."

It was murder, Krahmer explained.

"Murder! Well, that makes it an uglier business. Funny thing, I guess I feel partly responsible."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, having those old, defenseless men out on the street with so many juvenile delinquents around nowadays, all of them hell-bent for kicks. We've been

reducing the manually operated lamps—used to have only eight sections in the city where they were operable. I was just cutting it this week to seven because we're converting one section to automatic. I know this is a horrible thing to say, but in a way I guess it's lucky we can switch immediately.

"Otherwise, with Stoner's death, we'd be working one short. And you can't find lamplighters anymore. They're a dying breed. Oh, you could get a guy to light lamps —a kid could do that. But these old timers are more than torchbearers. They *know* lamps. Most of the men I have left have been at this all their lives."

"I'd like to see them," requested Krahmer. "Can you get them together?"

"Tomorrow morning in my office. I guess I can get them all there. Say ten o'clock."

Krahmer agreed, and hung up. He left the phone booth and returned to his coffee. He told Neary what had transpired. The Homicide man laughed. "Quit dramatizing this thing, Ben. There's no big mystery about it. Some punk came by, saw the old man, figured he was an easy take, grabbed him, stabbed him, frisked his pockets, and then tied him to the post and walked on. That's all there was to it. One of these days we'll catch a punk on another job. When we shake him loose, a confession will pop for this one, and we'll be able to mark the file closed."

"Aren't you going to come to this meeting tomorrow?"

"I might, just for laughs. What do you expect to find anyhow?"

Krahmer grinned. "Lamplighters. The last living collection of them in the United States. It'll be like seeing the final encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic. No—I'm forgetting there's no Grand Army left."

Next morning, at ten a.m., Ben Krahmer walked into the City Hall Annex office of the Deputy Director of Water and Gas. He felt like Rip Van Winkle waking up in the world of the little men. That's what they were—grey sparse-bearded, bald and shrunken. Men bent in the pretzel twister of time. They had all been beat into the same mold, with watery eyes and toothless mouths.

Cordi, the Deputy Director, was in his forties and he chuckled at Krahmer's reaction. "I know how you feel," he whispered. "The first time you meet them it's overwhelming."

There were seven sets of rheumy eyes and seven pointed noses and seven crease-puckered mouths all staring at Krahmer. Cordi took him down the line introducing him. Monohan, White, Canardy, Gross, Lonegan, Royton, and Caledge. Each put out a hand that belonged to a skeleton, and each nodded and smirked as they were

introduced. The Water and Gas man then turned the floor over to the Morals Lieutenant.

"I suppose you heard about Mister Stoner,"—Krahmer began.

They nodded.

They'd heard.

"Poor Johnny," said the one named Lonegan. "Always told him he was too careless."

"Yeah," said another sarcastically whose name was Caledge. "And what would you do if somebody came at you on the street with a gun or knife?"

"I'd give 'em the fire!" Lonegan held his finger out like a gun. "Squirt 'em with the light. *Phewt! Phewt!* It'd be like a flame-thrower I seen in the newsreels durin' the Korean war."

Krahmer asked his questions, and got little information he could use. It had been a shock to all of them. Some took it more personally than others. Caledge was one of them. He had a right to. He was going to retire when they closed down the next district.

"Ah," growled Lonegan, a bald-headed man. "That's a phony. You'll never quit."

"An' why wouldn't I want to," challenged Caledge spryly. "I'll have it easy with my son and daughter-in-law, takin' the pension, and nothin' to do except what I want. No up and down them lampposts with the light. No goin' out in all kinds of weather. No seein' the young punks dance around me and call me names and make fun of me."

"You'll never take the pension," insisted Lonegan. "Not until they carry you out."

They made a contrasting pair, toe to toe, arguing. Then Caledge shook his name and grinned. "Okay, maybe you're right," he said. "So I won't take the pension."

"At least not until we can retire some of the other manual sections," said Cordi, laughing.

Krahmer was serious, though. "Is that what you think happened to Stoner?" he asked. "That some young punk jumped him?"

"What else?" asked Caledge. "Who else would want to kill one of us harmless old coots who light lamps?"

Krahmer reported all this by phone later to Frank Neary and the Homicide man laughed at him. "We checked them at their homes last night. We didn't want to take a chance on them all getting together and maybe making up a story."

Feeling a little let down, Krahmer re-cradled the receiver. He spent most of his day in the normal routine of his squad. It wasn't until afternoon that he started to think about the slain lamplighter again. Then he called Cordi at the Water and Gas Department.

"Who took the territory that Stoner used to have?" asked Krahmer.

"Lonegan. We had to switch them all around."

"And which section did you give Caledge?"

"Oh, that's over in the Fifth District—right next to Stoner's old territory. It's the one that used to be Lonegan's. When we moved Lonnie, I put Caledge in. Why?"

"Just curiosity. It's worse in a police officer than in a cat or a woman."

"Oh, come on, Lieutenant! It's more than that."

"Well, maybe it is. I was just wondering . . . You say this is the only job those old lamplighters have had for fifty years. And those jobs are being closed out? What if one of those men is going to kill off the others so that there always will be a place for him?"

The City Water and Gas man almost had hysterics over the phone. "That's the funniest thing I ever heard," he finally said between laughs. "Those old men are a club. Very exclusive, very snobbish. Their group is about the closest thing that any of them has left to cherish. No, Lieutenant, I'm afraid the theory's far-fetched. Besides, you don't have to worry about them too much longer. In view of what happened to Stoner, we're afraid to trust the old men out on the street alone. So we're going to accelerate our modernization program in the gaslight sections. We'll be closing all of them out within the next few weeks. The decision was made this Noontime, and I called each of them this afternoon and told him to expect a cutback."

In a dissatisfied frame of mind, Krahmer thought over everything he had learned about the lamplighter slaying. Then he shrugged. Maybe Neary and Cordi were right. He had no evidence or facts to go on. Only a hunch about something that even he couldn't define. He decided, to hell with it. It wasn't his responsibility.

But it was easier said than done. All afternoon that elusive hunch kept annoying him. Finally, a few minutes before five, he had Hal Uritz drive him to the street on which old man Stoner had been killed. Afternoon was settling in. The street lights were still too weak in the dwindling illumination which was left from the sun to dent the shadows, but their time would come with the night.

Ben Krahmer stepped briskly into a drugstore and made a phone call to the Water and Gas Department again. Cordi was developing a slightly wearied tone, but he repeated his assurance that the same schedules were being maintained by the lamplighters.

Krahmer then walked quickly past a few houses, and up the steps to the room used by Marcia Coe. An urgency was mounting in him, a touch of fear as he asked her one vital question. The instant he

got her answer he dashed down the steps, jumping two and three at a time. Out on the sidewalk he waved his hand and Hal Uritz brought up the squad cruiser. Krahmer leaped inside.

"Get to Section Five as fast as you can," he ordered. "That's down a few blocks and over one."

In silence the car tore along the street and turned the corner. It turned up the other street and they could see two small figures in the distance. Bent-over figures with their long rods that were used to light the lamps.

"Hurry it up!," Krahmer. Swiftly the car picked up speed.

The two figures were close together, almost at handshaking distance from each other when the car screeched to a halt in the street and Ben Krahmer leaped out, pushing both men so hard that they went sprawling. By the time they started getting to their feet, Uritz was out of the auto too. He had a light hold on Mister Caledge, who was sputtering and protesting. The driver paid him no heed.

"Here he is, Lieutenant," said Hal. "I don't know what it's about but I got the little so-and-so!"

"Let him go, Hal." Krahmer had his own hand on the arm of Lonegan, the second little man. "Here's our fellow. Aren't you, Mister Lonegan?"

"You're crazy!" Lonegan's words sounded like a mouthful of P's.

But Krahmer already was frisking the little man, turning out his pockets. He came up with the long, thin steel blade detached from an icepick. And, as he held it up, he explained. "Stoner was killed with an ice-pick blade—not the whole weapon. That's the mistake we made. But you see these lighting gadgets—"

Krahmer held up Lonegan's.

"Long and thin and hollow, with a curve at the top, and a strip that runs out so it can fit under the mantle of the lamps to light them. It's the right size and the right length. A man could slip an ice-pick blade into that strip at the top and the point would stick out just enough to be able to kill somebody. Like this!" He demonstrated.

"But why?" demanded Uritz, staring hard at Lonegan. "Why would he want to kill Stoner? And what was he going to do now? Kill this man?" His finger pointed to Caledge.

"What does a man do when his life is threatened?" Krahmer asked sadly, and then gave his own answer. "He tries to prolong it. It's like the old story about the Russians in the sleigh with the wolf pack chasing them. Keep throwing out one person after another to delay the final reckoning. The law of survival. Everyone is expendable but yourself. Yester-

day it was Stoner, today Caledge, tomorrow someone else.

"That's the way it was here, wasn't it, Lonegan? The lamplighter jobs were getting scarcer and there were too many lamplighters. Someone would have to go. You were afraid it would be you, weren't you?"

"I had the least seniority," Lonegan piped in a calm, reedy voice. "The others were ahead of me. The City was going to lay one off, and it would be me. For years I'd been afraid it would come. The others all had fifty years in. I had only forty-three. I couldn't take a layoff. I'd starve and die inside. No lamps to light. No children to look at me and clap when the glow goes on. No people to nod and say, 'Hello, How are you?', and smile because I bring the light into their live. I couldn't take the pension. It would leave me nothing. No one—"

"How did you know, Lieutenant?" asked Hal. "What made you suspect?"

"The lamps on the street where Stoner was murdered," Krahmer said. "They told me."

"I saw them. I was there with you. But they didn't tell me nothing."

"We arrived there at five, didn't we? And the lamps were on. I went up and asked Marcia Coe and she said they always came on at five-twenty this month. Cordi, at Water and Gas, said the regular time schedules were being maintained. Therefore when the lights in Section Seven were on twenty minutes early, there had to be a reason. Twenty minutes would give the killer time to get to another Section and kill the lamplighter there. So it was clear to me that Lonegan was the murderer."

"Couldn't it have been a mistake? Maybe his watch was wrong."

"Not when he's been doing the same thing for forty-some-odd years. You don't change habits without a damn good reason. Unless it was a matter, say, of life or death."

Uritz turned to Caledge. "Can you understand why your buddy did it?" he asked.

The old man looked at Lonegan a long second, then nodded. "Certainly. He didn't want to be lonely."

They were moving toward the Morals cruiser at the curb and, as they passed the street lamp, Lonegan stopped a moment, reached over and took the long pilot rod from Caledge. "May I?" he asked Ben Krahmer.

The Lieutenant nodded. The old man reached up and very carefully, very jealously, lit the lamp. Then he handed the rod back and marched on toward the car followed by Caledge, Uritz and Krahmer.

The Lieutenant looked tired. "Call in and tell Telegraph to have

Frank Neary meet us outside the Homicide office. I want to turn Lonegan over to him. We've got no business in this. It isn't even our case."

Krahmer turned to say something to the two lamplighters. But didn't. Because they were staring out the window at the passing gas lights, mesmerized, following the glow with their eyes as the illumination faded into the distance, staring at it as though it was the last spark in the world.

Then it went out behind them as the car turned a corner. And the electricity was on, with its brightness and its wires.

It was Caledge, the man who had almost became a victim tonight, who sneered at the mazda lamps in their high poled reflectors. "It ain't like it used to be. They just don't have no more room for a lamplighter any more."

Krahmer glanced at both old men and then at the killer. Ben wondered if Lonegan really should be tried. For, that was all Lonegan had been trying to do . . . Make room for a lamplighter.

Ben looked up at the sky. The planets in their courses were ancient too—and when ancient things departed life was never quite the same. But you had to carry on and pretend it didn't matter too much—until you became ancient yourself and too old to dream.

"HE'S IN THE PRISON ORCHESTRA"

A NEW COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE NOVEL NEXT MONTH

Walk East On Twelfth Street

The police lose sleep when a maniacal killer goes on the prowl. But it's a great deal tougher on the madman's tragically handicapped victim.

by THOMAS CALVERT McCLARY

I PUT MY FOOT in things the minute I got home. I tossed down the evening papers and remarked, a little too matter-of-factly, it seemed, "It looks like your friend Kitten O'Day purred at the wrong man this time."

Ilsa, my pretty little birdbrain of a wife, eyed me as if I were a viper. She said with tones like breaking icicles, "A woman scarcely purrs at a complete stranger who breaks into her home and attacks her!"

I said pointedly, "A complete stranger scarcely does break into a home in the toniest and best policed suburb of New York! This wasn't an isolated house or a sandlot case, Ilsa."

My wife's black eyes heated like charcoal at the insinuation. "You didn't read that she'd been shadowed by a strange man loitering in the neighborhood for a week past?"

"Yes," I nodded. "I read that. Why didn't she call the police?"

"Just possibly," Ilsa breathed moltenly, "because she didn't want

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to look like a hysterical fool or to stir up scandal! People do have personal affairs they don't want aired in public."

I went to mix us a drink, letting a husband's sardonic chuckle drift across my shoulder. Returning with the tray, I capped the argument with the remark, "Kitten's story doesn't make sense. She's covering something or somebody, even if she did get badly mauled."

My opinion went to waste. Ilsa had left the room. When she reappeared, she was wearing her coat and a toque and pulling on kidskin gloves. She said frigidly, "There's a potpie in the oven for you. I've got time to walk to school for a change."

I took her by the shoulders. "Hey there," I told her. "I don't want to fight with you over Kitten, even if I don't like her."

Ilsa said coolly, "It's not over Kitten, actually. "It's over you. You're getting smug, midtown, junior executive. Ever since Hong Kong Imports made you sales manager, you've got a pat answer on everything."

She slipped smoothly out of my hands, but stood a moment to scorch me with her gaze. "When I married you, you had a little humility. Now you're just too cool. I don't suppose you think that you could get into a spot where everybody doubted you?"

I made a man's embattled gesture. "Ilsa —"

Words wouldn't work. She was mad. So mad that she closed the door almost silently.

I picked up her drink and drank that too. I didn't know about Kitten, for sure, but I did know about Ilsa. Somehow, I was losing her.

But damn it, Kitten should have called the police if she was being followed, and the fact that she hadn't, made her story look very suspicious. Just in fairness, Ilsa should have conceded that much.

I felt sore and upset. For some reason, I looked in the mirror as I put on my hat, and what I saw there didn't help my mood one damned bit. I was wearing the same suit and shirt and tie and hat, from the same stores, as any other junior executive in midtown Manhattan. I had "j.e." written all over me. Even the haircut and the vest. Until I was lifted into our company's hierarchy, I'd never worn a vest in my life. My hats had always been the envy of my more robust fishermen friends.

I muttered "Hell!" and slammed out to find a restaurant. But I forgot about eating and drifted downtown to Dodo's before I realized where I was heading. Dodo is a rough and tumble pal of mine from Korean days. We were both top kicks, but he had one thing up on me. He had been brigade heavyweight champ.

Now he owned a bar on the lower East Side, where the "underprivileged" my little birdbrain wife

is always yammering about wear fifteen-dollar shirts and drive Cadillacs. Dodo was arguing fights with five husky-shouldered pals. The thought crossed my mind, "*Whose* underprivileged? I don't know five or six friends who'd stop by of an evening just to shoot the breeze, unless there was some deal in the offing! And I still can't afford a Cadillac."

Dodo left his argument to come down bar and have a drink. The bar filled up and he got busy. I pulled my collar open and enjoyed my bad mood playing Catrina Valente's *Ciao* on the blaring juke box. It felt good to drink in a place where a man drinks to get drunk—which I suppose is the ultimate purpose of drinking, although my midtown acquaintances deny it sanctimoniously as they stumble over words and miss their suburban trains.

Some big walrus came in and drank next to me. I didn't realize how apt my expression had been until I was coming back from the juke box and got a real good look at him. This man was incredible. He stood six feet three on midget legs. His torso was mammoth. With ordinary proportions, he'd have stood seven feet and a half.

His face was literally covered with warts, or something similar. Oddly enough, in spite of this monstrous affliction, he was rather good-looking under the warts, with wavy black hair lightly streaked with grey. Fantastically, his face was absolutely smooth-shaven.

It's hard not to stare at someone like that, but I doubted if he'd have known. He was too occupied admiring his diabolical reflection in the mirror. He had a cat-ate-the-canary smile upon his mouth that never left it. After a few beers, he began moving like an elephant to some inward rhythm, and muttering to himself.

It took a long while for me to get on to the fact that he was goofed on heroin. I probably wouldn't have noticed it at all, except that Dodo's hard-looking friends kept a wary eye on this character from down bar.

His muttering grew into jumbled conversation as he drank. He was having one helluva argument with himself. His voice began to get violent at times, and Dodo would come along to quiet him. He made Dodo nervous, and Dodo is not a boy to make nervous. This character knew it. He'd subside before Dodo got to him.

But finally, he became too noisy in between. Dodo came up and took away his glass and dumped it. Dodo growled "What the hell you think, you own the bar for a couple of beers? I've told you before—now get out and stay out!"

The monstrosity offered no argument at all. It was almost as if he didn't hear. He looked across Dodo into the mirror with that damned self-vaunted smile, ran a hand over

his jaws and smoothed his hair.

He never even looked at Dodo. He just said, "All right," and put his hands in his coat pockets and started to turn. But he froze facing me and muttered, "That's all right for Dodo, but you, I ain't forgetting! I'll give you something to stare at. I'll give you a belly full of icepicks!"

"I told you to get out, Gino," Dodo barked, and leaned over to shove his shoulder roughly.

"All right, all right," this character repeated, and moved quietly out, giving the impression of a giant body moving out on wheels rather than on those stubby legs of his.

Dodo asked me, "You have any trouble with Luccio tonight?"

I made a gesture. "Not a word until just now, when he started to turn. You heard what he said."

"Watch yourself when you go home," Dodo warned.

I looked at him in amazement. "He won't even remember whatever's bothering him by then. He was too far out to realize what he was saying."

"Just watch yourself," Dodo repeated. "That's all—stay careful. Lemme know when you're going and I'll get you a cab."

I said, "For Pete's sake, Dodo, you forgotten I was in Korea too?"

"That's okay," Dodo said. "That goon has one up on you. He was in Murder, Incorporated."

A chill went down my spine. I remembered the newspaper descriptions then. *"The Iceman"* they'd called him, because he committed his butcheries with an icepick. Somehow, although there'd been incontrovertible evidence against him, he'd been lost in the shuffle and gone free. I felt certain Luccio was the Iceman.

I didn't tell Dodo I was going, but he caught it. He came around the bar to walk me to the door and out to get a taxi. As I got in, I saw this character standing a few doors down, looking straight out at the street, still swaying like an elephant, still wearing that insane smile at some picture in his warped mind.

I'd have sworn he didn't even notice us. Except for the lingering image of his incredible looks, I had forgotten him by the time I got home.

But I thought of him again next day at quarter to five. He was across the street from my office, standing beside a columned doorway, when I came out. Just standing there, watching. He looked right through me. He made no effort to follow, but there he'd been, probably all afternoon.

How he'd secured my name or address, I couldn't figure. He had it. That was enough. I turned fast into the *Angus* and had a double drink. The hairs on my neck were standing out like a dog's hackles, but there was ice in every notch in my back.

Of course, it might have been

coincidence. But it wasn't, and I couldn't kid myself. I wondered what the hell to do about it. Call cops? What then? They couldn't do anything about him except to let him know they were onto him, and he was an old hand at that game.

No, they couldn't do anything about him, but they could do plenty about me! They could investigate to find out what connection there was between me and this psychopathic hood. When they did, I would look very vulnerable and suspicious as sales manager of an import house whose chief item was raw opium for medicinal manufacturers.

Then they would dig around with questions at the office and perhaps demand to look at the books. Our ultra-conservative president would not like that at all. In fact, he would like it so little that he would quickly find a new sales manager. And these plum jobs aren't hanging around on trees.

I thought of getting a pistol permit. But did you ever try getting one of those little cards in New York City? The leading hoodlums have them, but they have a real bona fide excuse—they carry a lot of stolen money and somebody's always gunning after them for some rubout they arranged. If you're just a common, law-abiding citizen, you stand the chance of the proverbial snowball.

However, I did possess a fairly formidable gun that had earned its notches in Korea. If I carried it, whether or not I had to use it for indisputable self defense, I would be guilty of a felony. If both the monstrosity and myself happened to survive a run-in, the chances were that his mouthpieces would get him off without sentence, while I'd spend a year in jail.

That left me—right here at the *Angus* with an empty glass. I had another drink. All around me were other executives of about my own age, redolent with the air and expression of liberal expense accounts, authority, influence—all of the things I'd taken pride in until about a half hour ago. I knew most of them, several quite well. I couldn't see one who wouldn't immediately suspect me either of being balmy, or of secret connections with the underworld. I'd just have to tell them the story without embellishments to damn myself in ten different ways.

So I told no one and took a cab home. I looked to see if Luccio was watching my house, half-expecting that he would be. And he was. Leaning against the corner of the building across the street, his eyes trained on vacancy.

My feelings switched to fear for Ilsa. I found a note upstairs that she was out to dinner, and thanked heaven for that. It would have been impossible to tell her the

story and persuade her that we were both in the deadliest kind of danger. She'd think I'd gone stark crazy. She'd probably call my boss to discuss it, and maybe Bellevue.

Then it occurred to me that, in all probability, Luccio did not know her by sight—yet. There was just one way to make sure that he stayed ignorant. That would be to make myself so easily available that he'd have no need to trail me uptown.

I got my gun, threw a bullet into the chamber, and jammed it inside my shirt under my belt. I had no definite idea of how it would help me, but it felt good. In fact, I felt almost quiet and confident, until I remembered what would happen if some detective happened to spot that gun. Carelessness could triple the risks, such as an unguarded stretch on my part that would show the rod's bulge, or a cough that would drop it through my pants leg, or the feel of its hard bulk in brushing through a crowd. But guilt and all, I packed it, and went back downtown to Dodo's.

Luccio was standing just as he'd stood when I'd taken a taxi home the night before. In the several hours I spent there upending double whiskies he didn't come into the bar. He was not in sight when I left, and there was no sign of him near my house.

Next day, I walked the whole length of my office block at both lunch and quitting time, and failed to see him. He was not in my house block when I went home. I tried to tell myself that it was all a coincidence, or just a hopped-up bluff, but my instincts rejected those ideas flatly.

I went down to Dodo's again, and he was in the same position, reliable as a wooden Indian. He had the same vapid smile on his face and he watched traffic in front of him, not me. But I thought his smile deepened a shade when I went into Dodo's. Twice that I noticed, he walked by the window.

I began going to Dodo's every night, like a man on a drunk. But the liquor wasn't hitting me in the usual way. It was sharpening my senses, turning me incredibly keen and alert to the slightest sounds, tones, smells, looks. Rightly or wrongly, I had the feeling that my physical coordination was extremely sensitive and deep.

As far as I could tell, I had drawn him off my uptown haunts. He thought I was on a drunk and had made Dodo's my headquarters, and that was good enough for him. It was also good enough for me. It eliminated Ilsa from the peril.

It is a strange thing how the human mind operates at such times. After the first shock of realization that here—right in little old, well-policed, civilized New York—an experienced madman

meant to murder me, the threat ceased to bother me. Actually, I was rather enjoying it. Or part of me was—that primitive, savage part of every man that rises aggressively into consciousness at the first threat of danger.

Of course, it was incredible that there was nothing a man could do under these circumstances. Here was a maniac whom the newspapers, and the D.A. had said was guilty of over a hundred heinous, sadistic murders, yet he had never served time for a single one of them. Probably, others of his victims had known he was after them, just as I did, but had been powerless to defend themselves.

Well, I could damn well defend myself as long as I packed that gun! But of course I was breaking the Sullivan Law, and that worried me. Two or three times, I thought of Kitten's excuse for not calling the police. It had a more truthful ring now. But it was the first time I'd ever been in a position where honesty could get you into trouble.

I doubt if Luccio had breathed a word or a threat to the crowd at Dodo's. I certainly hadn't said anything more, even to Dodo. But that tough crowd smelled out every piece of the picture. They watched the lethal game with the intense, critical appraisal they'd give a prizefight.

I think they had a sympathetic contempt for me because I was trying to handle the affair in a more or less civilized, semi-law-abiding fashion. They'd been raised in the tough jungle of the East Side and were far more realistic. If somebody is after your scalp, get them first. But the mores of respectability had me hogtied there.

Twice, Dodo asked me if I was taking the wife away for a winter vacation. I said, "No," and it seemed to bother him. He gave me a downright sentimental talk about the way a man in my economic bracket should treat his wife.

Another time he told me that I shouldn't walk the neighborhood so much, I ought to use cabs. He made his caution easy, and without looking directly at me. He pointed out that I was drinking pretty hard, and that I might look like an easy roll to the neighborhood kids.

"You use cabs all the time?" I asked.

He said, "Well, they know me. I grew up here." What he was actually saying was, "They know damned well they'd wind up in the river or an alley if they jumped me!"

During the next ten days, Luccio never came inside the bar again when I was there. I gathered that Dodo had barred him on some excuse to keep the two of us from the proximity that would set the fireworks going. On one occasion, I was walking the neighborhood

as an intentional lure to see if he still had me in mind.

I walked by him and never got a look from him. But at the corner, I looked back from the corner of my eye, and he had started following, his short legs making unbelievably good time, creating a fantastic picture of monstrous motion.

One of Dodo's friends, moving toward him, stopped directly in his path to make some trivial conversation, demanding loudly enough for me to hear, "What's the hurry, what's the hurry, Gino?"

That killed his shadowing that night—it was the most that Dodo or his friends could do. But the incident emphasized my loneliness and peril starkly.

I had my first bad dream, so vivid I can still cringe to it. I was in a trackless desert clawing my way desperately through sloughing sands that formed a ridge, my body tiny against an enormous horizon of blood-red sky. Somewhere ahead of me, the ridge was blocked by a granite bluff with no breaks in its surface. Behind me, a monstrous black animal was following at a lope, its teeth savagely bared, its eyes blazing.

Ilsa was holding me, shaking me and soothing me, when I broke through the sleep barrier back to consciousness. She gave me a strange look at breakfast next morning. Obviously, she'd misinterpreted the ghastly nightmare completely.

She said, "You know, I really don't want that mink we were talking about last month. They're getting too common. I think I'd rather have something in material, maybe fur-trimmed."

I cracked a fond smile at her. I said, "I'm not going to rob the company for a mink! Matter of fact, we could swing it if your heart is set on it, but it means a less exciting summer vacation."

She looked relieved, but the incident bothered her for several days. Even though she was busy getting super-cultured five nights a week, I guess she wondered how I'd been spending the time.

The game couldn't keep up indefinitely, of course. It was causing a situation at home. Ilsa was beginning to suspect I might have found another girl friend. And there was something else. The original savage challenge had died out of the chase. The need to make a daily appearance at Dodo's was getting monotonous, and interfering with my normal life. Even while my conscious mind had the situation under control, my subconscious was rebelling, demanding action, and an end to strain. In the past two weeks, I'd lost considerable weight. I was getting jumpy in the office, and I'd made an inexcusable error on two orders, in one case listing 200 kilos of opium as twenty.

It had been a hard day in general and I walked home, although

a blizzard seemed in the making. It was a raw and blustery night. A ripping wind tore across town from the river. The streets were wet, and a wet snow slanted in sheets across the street lights. Not so far down town from our apartment, the beamed lights of the Con Edison Tower barely stabbed the four points of the compass into the storm.

In spite of walking, I was early. My curious frau remarked with puzzlement, "You do pick the damnedest weather to walk in!" She took my coat, which was unusual, and then went to mix us drinks.

She laughed when she came back, and said, "I've seen you so little lately that I'm just noticing you aren't such a bad looking fellow for a husband!"

I lifted my glass. "Vice versa! How's the culture coming?"

She made a face. "I must be a primitive at heart. It's getting boresome." She hesitated, then said, "I guess I can be crazy in this kind of weather, too. Suppose I let the class go tonight and we have dinner at Luigi's? If you can stand it for one drink, I told Kitten O'Day I'd stop over."

I looked surprised. "She give up the suburbs?"

"She's about given up, period," Ilsa told me, her smooth, thin face going taut with worry for a moment. "She's scared to be alone—even at a hotel. That—incident—did something to her."

She thought a moment. "It's a terrible thing to say, but it may have done her good. She's lost all of that cynical super chichi she had before. Except that she's scared, she's like the girl I went to school with."

She looked at me questioningly.

I said, "Damn it, I wouldn't mind a drink with her, and I would like a night on the town with you for a change! But I've got a dinner date with Charley Samms on business."

Ilsa's eyes veiled. She didn't believe that. She said, "I should have thought to suggest it in advance." She gave a stiff, chill smile. "Well, we'll probably have another night of just as rotten weather to get crazy in!"

When a home's breaking up, you don't get chances like this often. Two people can't just say, "We'll be close together and friendly next Thursday," and be that way. You have to make the most of an opportunity when it comes up, and here, damn it, was the opportunity. But unfortunately I couldn't take it. If I failed to show up downtown, that maniac might take it into his head to begin haunting me uptown, and Ilsa would be in peril.

I hadn't realized how much my emotions were crowding up. I had been in some kind of trauma where I was not consciously feeling. Maybe my conscious mind refused to accept this fantastic pic-

ture, and I half expected the threat to vanish.

But right at that instant, seeing the doubt and hurt and reserve flood over Ilsa's pretty face, hate suddenly surged through me. I wanted to get this whole act over, and get it over fast. I had a quiet fury in me now that Luccio had interfered with a chance to straighten things out with my wife.

I poked around the house until I got a chance to grab my gun without Ilsa knowing, and then made my daily pilgrimage to Dodo's. The killer had moved his usual post tonight. He was standing inside the tenement doorway, his collar pulled up around his ears. In this kind of weather, there was no other possible reason for him to be outside at all except to keep watch on me.

I was the only customer in Dodo's when I went in. We had a drink together and he sat on his stool reading the sports page. I played Catrina Valente on the juke.

I got to thinking about Ilsa. Damn it, she was making an effort to get us back onto a decent family basis. I should have freed myself for her whim tonight. It was unreasonable to have some hopped up maniac interfering with your life like this.

Then I wondered what had made the change in her. One thing sure, I hadn't been thinking in midtown j.e. terms for a long time now! I was a man strictly concerned with his own survival in a jungle.

Dodo said out of the blue, "When I was a kid, this is the kind of a night the smart gangs worked."

It stood to reason. The wind was howling, and not many people were on the streets. It was an uncomfortable and opportune night for crime. The thought spun inside my head like a roulette wheel. The decision to call an end to this game chocked into some slot in my thinking. Red or black, I couldn't tell yet. I simply knew I was going to end this insane threat, somehow, tonight.

Oddly, the bar filled up. Luccio moved slowly by the windows a few times, stood in front of the swinging doors looking in, and then came in. Dodo threw him a warning look, but served him a shot of whiskey.

We stood in the same places we had the first night. He had the same look on his face, and watched himself in the mirror. He rocked like an elephant, just as he had the other time. But he did no muttering. He was strictly a good customer.

The clock edged toward eleven. Usually that was early for this neighborhood, but tonight, the streets were almost deserted. The wind howled harder, and the snow was heavier, although it was

still wet. There are times when a devastating loneliness grips the streets of New York, and this was one of them. Even traffic was almost dead.

I had a last shot with Dodo. I said, "I've got some business east on Twelfth Street."

He gave me a hard, warning look. He said, "This is helluva night. You want a cab?"

I said, "No. It's only a step." Then I said with an assurance I didn't feel. "I'll be back."

His mouth compressed. He said, "You're a damn fool." He watched me leave with an expression on his face similar to the first time we'd taken out patrols in Korea.

I turned up my collar and bent into the wind. It came hard across Twelfth Street, the big flakes of wet snow sticking to my eyelashes and distorting vision. The street lamps midway down the blocks glowed like satellites high up in the storm. They spread little light to the street tonight.

Midway of the block, I flung a look across my shoulder. Luccio's huge bulk showed under the corner lamp a moment, then merged into the seas of snow driving through the block. He was coming as fast as I was walking, his short legs pumping under him, a malevolent, sinister movement through the shadows.

I had one instant of panic. Every instinct in me urged, "Run fast! It's your only chance!"

Then my hand was on the butt of my gun. Grim calm dropped over me. This was what I'd wanted, and here it was. Not a person on the streets, not a prowl car coming through. I thought, "I've got no compunction about shooting this maniac!" God knew, I'd probably shot better men at war. My only worry was in getting caught.

I moved on down the block, across the avenue. The solitary light along this street was the sickly-blue, neon light of a funeral parlor, promising air conditioning within. The thought jolted me with rough humor. I'd be plenty air conditioned when he finished jabbing at me with an icepick. But even with my hand on the gun and the determination to end this once and for all I had no idea what I meant to do.

I glanced back again. That grotesque figure was still coming through the drive of snow. He was coming steadily, like a huge clown peddling a big-wheel tricycle. His short, chopping legs did not seem part of his body at all. Somehow, he had closed the distance.

I crossed Avenue "A". There were fewer street lights here. The tenements were more run down. Even in that grey storm, it had the smell of a street where slinking people faded into shadows—people who saw nothing, heard nothing, and told nothing. I heard no

sound from behind me, but I knew that he was catching up.

I turned abruptly through a door into a smelly hall barely lighted by one small bulb. I mounted the stairs simply because they were there. My mind groped madly for some plan of action, but I had none. There was simply a suspension of thought—almost a suspension of feeling. I went up, and up another flight, simply because I'd started. I was on the third flight when I heard the downstairs door creak open and shut, and felt the draft it spiraled upward.

I could picture him standing down there, eyes piercing the shadows of the hall, his breathing suppressed and controlled by long experience. Somehow, I knew he was standing dead still, listening. There had been no slightest murmur of conversation inside any door I passed. I wondered if he'd spend long minutes listening at each door, or guess that I had no friend in this house.

The step under me groaned beneath a heavy tread. I heard the harshness of his breathing way down below, the gloating anticipation of the kill that must have been in him. For a heavy man, he could move very quietly. I continued on up.

One more flight, and I was at the door opening on the roof. I unhooked it, and stepped through into the whining wind and swirling chill. Just dimly, I could make out the low wall between the houses, and the dark blob of the doorhousing on the adjoining roof top.

Something in me said, *Wait there.* I crossed the roof, climbed the wall, and crouched in the pitch darkness of the next roof door. I had my gun in hand now, but I kept it inside my overcoat. My heart was beating in my ears, hard, but the beat was regular. I watched the very dim oblong of light in the door I had come out of.

Then he came, a block of solid shadow, moving cautiously but steadily after he leaped clear of the doorway. In the instant he passed through, something glinted once. He had the ice pick out and ready. He stopped, and I could see the solid dark blob of his head move vaguely against the skyline as if he were listening. But nothing could be heard over the moan of the wind and the banging of rusty tin and the debris of the rooftops.

His big body swung from the knees as he keened the darkness. He could not have seen my tracks. The wind had already scuffed them over, but his attention was focused on the roof I crouched on. He knew I was there, he knew I'd crossed the wall. He did not know where I was lurking, but he moved with experienced caution.

He moved down to the extreme end of the low wall and stood there listening and sensing. Sud-

denly, his whole body fronted in my direction.

I had two thoughts at once. One, *He's sensed me out!* The other, *I will have to get him now, while he's silhouetted against open sky.*

Both thoughts were calm and cool. I rose a little from my low crouch. I snapped down the safety of my gun and started to pull it from my coat. Started only, for my arm refused to move. The gun wasn't caught. I was simply frozen with buck fever. I was paying the penalty of civilization—the deep inward knowledge that the citizen shall not take the law into his own hands.

I tried to break the nerve-freeze, to get the gun clear, and leveled. I must have grunted in anger and frustration, for I heard the gloating rasp of his expelled breath in a lull of the storm. I cursed and prayed, but couldn't budge my arm. Suddenly I knew that even if I had the gun clear, I wouldn't be able to pull the trigger until I felt the gouge of that murderous icepick in me. And by then it would be too late.

The truth had to be faced. Murder, even of this mad dog, just wasn't in me. But it was in him, and from the movement of his shadow I knew that he was crossing the dividing wall.

I saw his bulk loom for an instant against the wild, streaked luminescence of the sky line, and then through the banging, whistling of the wind I heard a muffled curse. Then there was the sound of a sharply sucked-in breath, followed almost instantly by a weird, choked scream, sounding very distant, and whipped away by the wind.

I could hear nothing more. I could see no movement in the darkness. Cold sweat drenched my arms and shoulders, glued my shirt to my back. I was alone on the roof, and I knew it, but I couldn't figure what had happened to Gino Luccio.

After a long time, my body started to function. I crept in a crouch to the wall and cautiously felt my way along it toward the back, where he had started to cross. Step by step I moved along. My foot went out, and down, *and down*. Startled, I threw my weight backward and sidewise onto the low wall.

I had reached the extreme back of my roof. The wall belonged to the adjoining house, where the roof ran fifteen or twenty feet farther back.

I could picture the scene then, so vividly I might have seen it happen. Luccio crossing that wall with his stubby legs. They were not long enough for him to straddle the wall, and with his eyes fixed in my direction, he had thrown himself across. And there had been nothing there on my side of the wall to catch him. He

had simply hurtled to the back yard below.

I left the roof the same way I'd come up. A snore came from one door along a hallway. I heard no other human sound, and no lights showed beneath the flimsy doors. The street door screeched shut behind me and I was alone upon the wet, windy street. I passed nobody going back to Dodo's.

He gave me a "Welcome Home" smile and poured out real drinks, not shots. I dropped a quarter in Catrina Valente and came back to the bar. Dodo said, "What was that you were telling me just now?"

I stared at him a moment, for I hadn't said a word. Then I got the message. As far as he was concerned, I'd been there all night.

I tossed down the fiery drink. I needed it. I was beginning to come unstuck now in sharp snaps. I looked at the clock. Eleven thirty. I said, "I'd better get home to the little woman."

Dodo said, "She still deserves a vacation. Don't forget to stop down again sometime."

So he knew why I'd been coming and he knew that it was over.

A cab was cruising by in the wet slush. I managed to chatter out my address. He said, "You can get cold as hell on a wet night like this," and drove uptown.

Ilsa was home, sitting in front of her dressing table, combing out her thick, jet hair. It gave me a chance to duck the gun and run some cold water onto my grey, stiff face. She came out in a negligee, looking beautiul.

She said with surprise, "You're pretty early! Were her jokes old, or wouldn't she listen to yours?" Then her humor blotted out and she asked, "Are you all right?"

I nodded as I slumped into the overstuffed chair and felt the vertebrae in my back popping loose one by one. Ilsa was mixing a drink—a big one. "You see Kitten?" I asked her.

She thew me a puzzled look. "Why—why yes, I stopped by. I wish we could do something for her."

I took the drink from Ilsa, but I just sat holding it. After a moment I said, "Some pretty bad things can happen around this town. Would you like to invite her down here for a couple of months? We've got that extra room. Might give her back her confidence."

Ilsa stared at me until she rushed over and nearly smothered me with her hug. "Oh, lover!" she murmured in my ear. "Could I phone her and invite her now?"

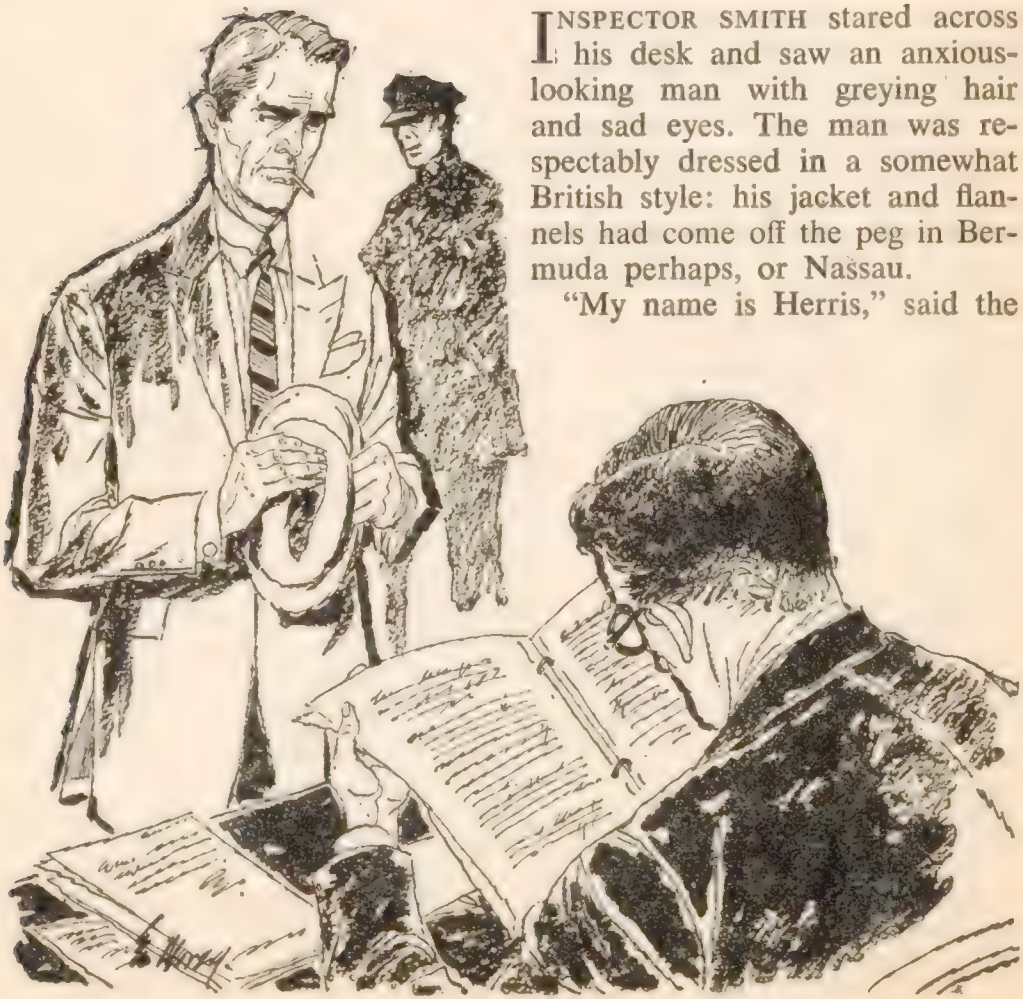
I said, muffled through her curves, "We can go get her tonight, if she wants."

Ilsa stood up and looked down at me and shook her head. "You can be human when you try," she said. Then she smiled, "No, maybe it's when you're not trying."

Roaming the world had put quite a distance between Harris and his own troubled past. So confessing to murder came hard.

a statement to the police

by FRANK SELSEY



INSPECTOR SMITH stared across his desk and saw an anxious-looking man with greying hair and sad eyes. The man was respectably dressed in a somewhat British style: his jacket and flannels had come off the peg in Bermuda perhaps, or Nassau.

"My name is Herris," said the

visitor, "John Herris. You may remember it."

"I'm afraid I can't recall it at the moment, sir."

"Better not address me as 'sir,' " said Herris, with a tone of irony, though not of humor. "You may be referring to me much more harshly in a few moments. I've called in connection with the murder of George Ridge, four years ago."

Inspector Smith did not answer at once. He knew the value of letting a visitor cool down. He glanced at an assistant officer, who rose and went out quietly. "Smoke if you like," he suggested. "No—not for me, thanks. Wretched weather, isn't it?"

"What I want to tell you—" Herris started to say.

"In just one minute, sir—"

Inspector Smith had a pink face, thin hair and froggy eyes that gave no hint of any thought behind them. He just sat and looked. Presently the assistant returned, bringing a file of papers. He was knocking dust off the sheets as he came in. Very deliberately Inspector Smith untied the file and glanced over the top page, which was a summary of the other contents.

"The Ridge case," he murmured. "Yes, Mr. Herris?"

"I've come to give myself up."

"Yes, Mr. Herris?"

"Cagey, aren't you?" snapped Herris. "I'm not a crank confessing to some imaginary crime. I am John Herris. Here's my passport. And I shot George Ridge. That's all there is to it."

The Inspector's eyelids veiled his eyes for a second and then lifted. "I see. Suppose you tell me just what happened."

"I have to make a statement, don't I—and sign it?"

"We'll see about that later. Just take it easy and talk naturally. By the way, have you seen Mrs. Herris lately?"

Herris gave a start. "Eh? Er—no. I only landed at Idlewild last night. I'd better not see her. I don't even know where she is."

"We'll be able to help you there, no doubt," said the Inspector. Unnoticed by Herris, the assistant glided out again.

Herris was lighting another cigarette. Then he gave a dry little laugh. "You see before you, Inspector, the sorry result of trying to get rich quick."

"That sort of thing is no novelty, I'm afraid."

"But I did get rich," said Herris. "I got forty thousand. Seems to me it isn't wanting money, but getting it that causes most of the trouble. When Joan and I were just skimping along, hoping to be rich some day, we were happy and didn't know it. But I was the sort of chap—I realize the folly of it now—who is always dreaming of a lucky strike. Some distant relative would leave us a fortune; or

I'd win on the horses; or hit on a simple, money skyrocketing invention. Actually it was the horse racing win—you know about that?"

The Inspector, without taking his eyes off Herris, fingered his digest of the Ridge case and nodded.

"Yes, three-quarters of the story will be in that file, no doubt," said Herris, "but I'd better give my own version. Before turning to the track for a quick, big-money killing I tried the invention angle. Nothing impractical about that. You can make money if you've ingenuity, and know the ropes. Gift-novelties, kitchen gadgets, display devices: there's scope. And I knew some of the ropes through working for Ridge. He was doing nicely with his hardware factory in Long Island City.

"I invented several little things that didn't quite hit the target. Usually it's production costs that floor you. You invent something that works, but it can't be sold for more than fifty cents and it can't be made for less than one dollar. Then I made my cheap household fire-extinguisher. It was no bigger, and scarcely any more expensive, than a soda-siphon and as simple to use. I thought that was a sure-fire winner and I talked Ridge into coming to dine with us one night, hoping he'd agree with me, and finance it."

"The boss comes to dinner," nodded Inspector Smith. "I know."

"Yes," said Herris, bitterly, "and you know how the dutiful and charming wife is supposed to buzz around, seeing that the boss is favorably impressed. Ridge *was* impressed. But not with my invention. After he'd seen the drawings, he talked for an hour about publicity and marketing and distribution and all that stuff—completely out of my line—and waved it away, and made me look like a fool. He was impressed, all right. But not with me. With Joan.

"One date led to another. In time, somehow, they became dates with Joan and not with me . . . you know."

"I know," said Inspector Smith.

"Meanwhile," Herris went on, "I'd shelved the invention and turned to the Irish Sweepstakes for that quick fortune. And I made it. Miraculously. Forty thousand. But, you see, what I wanted now wasn't just a financial shot in the arm. Any lucky dumb-bell might get that. I wanted success, in the Ridge manner. I wanted to look big in Joan's eyes—not merely lucky. Do you understand? And I was still on good terms with Ridge. So I talked to him again about the invention. He didn't wave it away this time—not with my forty thousand to back it up . . . We—he—floated a company.

"What exactly the financial set-

up was," Herris sighed, "or how it fitted in with Ridge's other enterprises, I never quite understood. I'm an engineer. But it crashed. After we'd had the works built and equipped, an English patent-holder popped up. And it was my money that was gone—not Ridge's. I'd a hunch that he'd taken my idea and disposed of it, with slight alterations, in England.

"Anyway, from having everything, I now had nothing. Not even Joan. Not even my self-respect. Ridge had the brains, after all."

"But your wife didn't—" Inspector Smith began.

"I'd better finish," Herris interrupted. "You told me to put it my own way. I've had four years in which to think it all over and get it straight in my mind. Joan had no reason to suspect that Ridge was double-crossing me. When you're ruined and desperate you'd suspect anybody and do anything.

"One night—you've got the date there—I want out to Ridge's place—his split-level ranch house in Whitestone—with a gun. I wanted to scare him and make him share the loss. I swear I had no other intention. But while I hung about, wondering whether to take a sock at him before I started reasoning with him the door opened and Joan came out and ran down the road towards the bus stop. Then I saw red.

"The door was still open. I walked straight in and shot Ridge twice from the living-room doorway as he sat by the fireplace. And then I went away. And that's all."

"All?" said Inspector Smith, intent-eyed and poker-faced.

"Oh, I suppose you want to know how I got away," said Herris. "That was the surprising part. There was nothing to it. I just went.

"I'd a few thousand left, and my passport. I was convinced nobody had seen me going out to Whitestone; and I'd had the gun for years. I've wandered South America, Mexico, Bermuda—and now I've come back. I want to put things right with Joan—and with my conscience. I give myself up."

The assistant had come in and placed a slip of paper before the Inspector, who glanced at it and nodded.

"Well," said Herris, "what happens to me now?"

"Happens?" said Inspector Smith. "If you take my advice you'll go back to your wife. This"—he pushed the slip across his desk—"is her last known address and I expect she's still there."

"But what I've told you is the truth!"

"It's the truth," agreed the Inspector, "as you think you know it. But you were away a long time and didn't read the New York papers. Well, thank you for clear-

(Concluded on page 118)

It was a cold-blooded crime, planned with brutal calculation. Five years in prison had given the planner what he thought was an edge on most kidnappers and their blundering contempt for the Law. He respected the Law and would leave no clues at all. So he was ready for—

The Big One

THE MAN AND WOMAN were lodged in a cheap hotel, their second floor window overlooking a drab street in Ybor City, Tampa's Cuban quarter. The night was very hot and a fan, set on the bureau, whirred softly in the darkness. From the street drifted the muffled sound of Latin music in a nightclub against the blurred counterpoint of traffic.

The man and woman lay beside each other on the brass bedstead, the man in his shorts, the woman in a white slip. The bedsprings complained as the man reached toward the bureau. He had to stretch to get cigarettes and matches.

He lighted a cigarette and handed it to the woman; then he lighted another for himself. They lay on their backs smoking, now taking no outward interest in each other.

In the half-light filtering in from the street the man was lean, wiry; his face was narrow, intense, intelligent and cruel. He lay very still, his features partly shadowed.

The woman was a blonde, for the third, fourth, or twentieth time in her life. The heat had caused her slip to cling to her. Her figure was slender, and in that sense good. She had succeeded in starving herself down to the poundage she wanted, but there was very little youth left in her body.

She drew on her cigarette, and the glow was kind to her face. She had small features, shadowed by a lurking tautness. Before the shadows ever came, when she was young, the small features had complemented each other in a

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An Unusual Mystery Novelet

by TALMAGE POWELL

way to make her look gamin, lively, and very pretty.

"I'm quite sure it will work," the man said casually.

The woman sat up and dropped her bare feet off the side of the bed. The man glanced at her back.

"You've got to think about it," he said, "until it loses its shock. Until you can live with it. Until it becomes nothing more than a business deal."

She sat with her shoulders slumped and said nothing. The man noted that her hair was like yellow straw where it was matted against the back of her head.

"That couple in Kansas City would have made it when they snatched the Greenlease kid," the man said, "if they'd had the necessary self-control."

"Is there that much self-control Garvin?" the woman said.

"I have it," the man said, not boastfully. "You're forgetting that I had nearly five years in which to learn it."

The woman turned and lay down, her lips close to his cheek. She put her arm across the lean muscles and bony ridges of his chest.

He didn't respond; neither did he push her away. There'd been reunion. Now the moment of its sentiment was past.

"Don't step on me, Garvin," she said against his cheek. "Please, I couldn't stand it."

They were the same words she'd fallen into the habit of using five, six years ago, in moments when she'd felt shut out, ignored, starved by the emotional barricades he could erect at will. He waited for the next inevitable words.

"Please, Garvin, don't go so far away from me. When you're really gone, in the flesh I mean, it's like you've never been. Sometimes I can't remember what you look like. But when you're here and shut yourself off and take yourself so far away it tears me up inside."

She began crying softly, and he lay perfectly still, only the muscles at the corners of his lips moving upward.

"You know I'm with you, Garvin," she said finally. "Only—"

"Yes?"

"Nothing can happen to the little boy."

"Of course not."

The muscles in the arm across his chest flexed; her nails bit into his shoulder. "You've got to mean it, Garvin."

"Sure, I do."

"Swear it."

"Oh, the hell with this maudlin stuff," he said, his voice a whip. "The Littleton kid's the merchandise, isn't he? Use your common sense, Theda. I'd be a fool to let anything happen to the kid."

"I worked there in the Littleton house all the time you were in prison, Garvin. I'd really be tore

up if anything happened to the kid."

"A little fright, Theda. Nothing more. I promise."

Abruptly, he pulled her head to the hollow of his shoulder. His eyes remained cold and hard, but the harshness melted out of his voice. "I owe you that much. A promise, at least. After all, it was finding you and learning that you worked there and seeing the setup that gave me the idea in the first place."

She shivered briefly, although the sweat on her face was mingling with the sweat coursing down the curve of his neck.

"You're glad you found me, Garvin."

"Sure."

"Even if I—just dropped out of sight and didn't write to you or anything while you were in prison?"

"Why should you?" he said. "I didn't expect it. What good would it have done?"

"Most men—"

"I'm not most men," Garvin said without inflection.

"I'm glad—sometimes. But sometimes it scares me."

"You don't need to be scared any more, Theda. The time for that is past. You've got to think about the job ahead—without fear. Only frightened people make mistakes, and a mistake would be too costly for us."

"I'll try, Garvin."

"You'll have to do more than try."

She started to raise her head, but he didn't release the weight of his hand and she abandoned the brief effort and re-settled herself against him.

"Garvin, I had a good reason for not writing or anything," Theda said.

"I'm sure you did."

"It was because—"

"I'm not interested. I've told you that I don't blame you. The past is past, and it doesn't matter now, except that I've learned by its mistakes."

"Garvin, I'd like to tell you—"

"Will you get off it? It's a dead issue, Theda. The future is what counts."

He disengaged himself from her, got off the bed, and walked to the closet. He opened the closet door and took out the suit he had hung on a wire hanger.

She was on one elbow, watching him. "Are we going to get dressed?"

"Yes."

"Going out?"

"Yes. I'm hungry."

"Me too. I could use a drink, too. A nice, tall, cold drink. It's about the hottest night—"

He spun around with the speed of a coil spring unleashing itself.

"No drinks," he said, a savage ring in his voice. "Not a single damn drop until it's all over. Maybe never again as long as you live.

People say things when they drink."

He let out a breath and relaxed slightly. "You must see, Theda. Every word, every motion must have its proper place for the next few days—and a long time later. You don't want to end up the way Bonnie Brown Heady and her boy friend did, do you?"

"God, no!"

"Then you'll do as I say. Exactly as I say. Nothing more, nothing less."

He began dressing in the twilight street glow. "I had five years to think about it. Five years shot to hell for peanuts. It all became terribly simple—as simple as the laws of mathematics."

"I don't understand stuff like that, Garvin."

"You can understand this. If you play for peanuts you can never get a pile that'll let you quit the game. You're forced to keep going—and sooner or later you're bound to get caught. That's the law of chance. Working against you in this case. Follow that, Theda?"

"Uh-huh."

He turned to the closet, took a white shirt from a wire hanger, slipped it on and began buttoning it. "However, it's possible to make the law of chance work for you. To do that you've got to be bold and completely ruthless. You single out and plan in detail one big crime. One big enough so that you'll never have to commit another. You have every advantage, for you're the only person who knows in advance the act is going to happen."

He was talking quickly now, his words clipped. A bright hard light had come to his eyes. The woman sat up in bed, her shoulders pulled in, her gaze fastened to his shadowed face.

"You strike fast and hard," Garvin said, as if he had repeated the words to himself a thousand times, "with cunning, and without mercy. You commit this one crime and cut every thread that might link you to it. You take the proceeds and go away, to some nice middle-sized town a hundred or a thousand miles away.

"You invest the proceeds in a good business and join the Elks and Kiwanis, even the Church. You're a civic-minded, respectable business man, citizen, and neighbor. You never touch another crime as long as you live, not even running a stop sign. You live quietly and comfortably—and there's not one chance in ten thousand you'll ever get caught."

The woman turned her head and looked at the darkness beyond the freight yards and Hillsboro River. "You make it sound simple and easy, Garvin."

"Simple, yes. Easy, no. But it will work. It will work because I'm not a common criminal. Because I have the self control to

take the one big pot and quit." He sighed and stood a moment as if a thrashing something were becoming quiescent in him.

"Hadn't you better get dressed, Theda?"

"I don't feel so hungry now, Garvin. I'm tired. Couldn't you bring me something? A sandwich would do."

"All right," he said. He put on his tropical weight coat. "Keep thinking about it, Theda—until it's just something difficult you've got to do. Difficult, but not frightening."

He picked up the cigarettes from the bureau and spilled a couple out of the pack to leave for her. He sat on the bed and leaned toward her. "You're not to go near the Littleton place again, Theda."

"I understand that."

"You left town when you quit their employment three weeks ago."

"I know, Garvin."

"Okay," he said, standing up. "They'll go up to the lake Thursday."

"They always do."

"We'll do it then. When the governess takes the kid up to the lake."

He left the woman alone in the darkness of the room. She was lying on her side, looking toward the square of window.

When he was gone, she began crying softly.

II

THE NEXT MORNING was Tuesday. Garvin woke early, smoked a cigarette, and stood at the bureau to count their financial assets.

Seven hundred and thirty-five dollars.

This represented the small savings account he'd had under another name when he'd gone to prison, the few dollars Theda'd had, and the money she had raised by pawning a watch and pair of earrings.

Seven hundred dollars against a hundred thousand or better. Not a bad ante.

Garvin crushed his cigarette in a tray on the bureau. He crossed to the bed and stood looking at Theda.

The morning light was harsh on her makeup of the night before. Her face looked loose and tired, and she slept with her mouth open. Her hair was matted against her temples with sweat. Garvin's lips thinned and he shook his head slightly. Then he went into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

Dressed and finished with his morning toilet, he was an interloper in the shabby hotel room. Small and agile, clean-shaven and healthy, his dynamic energy flashing in his gestures and the dark eyes under the high, white forehead, Garvin would have silently commanded the best service in

one of the better hotel suites downtown.

"Theda."

She groaned, turned her head slightly on the pillow, and opened her eyes. Her mouth remained slack for a moment. Then she remembered where she was and did her best to awaken with a bright smile.

The effect, Garvin thought, was ghastly.

"I let you sleep as long as possible," he said.

"That was nice of you, Garvin."

"I'm going out. I may be gone all morning. I'll leave five dollars here on the bureau for your breakfast and in case you want anything. But no drinks, understand?"

"Have you ever known me to drink much, Garvin?"

"No—it makes you too sick. But I want to be doubly sure."

"I'll be a good girl," Theda said. She propped on her elbows and invited a kiss with her puckered lips. Garvin bent and kissed her and left the room quickly.

She remained motionless for several minutes after Garvin had gone, caught between the necessity of getting up and the desire to surrender to the comfort of the bed.

She took a deep slow breath and raised herself to a sitting position. The new day was already hot—so hot it gave her the feeling she was caught in a clammy web. Lord, how tired I am, she thought.

She was almost overcome by the urge to forget everybody and everything, to let herself sag in every tired muscle and bone, to blank her mind to everything except rest.

Sometimes she told herself that she'd been born tired.

But that wasn't altogether true. There had been a time when she'd wake up glad to see a new day, convinced that life was going to turn out fine in spite of anything.

She tried to think back and pinpoint the time and thing that had given this bone-numbing tiredness its first birth. But she couldn't remember. There was no special time or event she could remember and say, "This is when it started." The tiredness had grown like drops of murky water seeping into a stagnant pool. At times it was her only reality, coming over her with such force that she would wonder if she'd wake up in hell if she killed herself.

The spectre of suicide would cause her scalp to pull tight, her breath to come with such shortness that she knew she was going to faint. Fine sweat would break on her face, chills would run along her spine, and she would almost cry out in her need for someone to hold her tight and tell her she was protected.

She never did faint; nor did anything snap inside; nor did she cry out. Instead, the moment of

anxiety would pass, leaving her exhausted, and she would cover her face with her hands and weep in great sorrow for the pitiful and miserable thing that she was.

She struggled out of bed, went to the closet and got her dress. She'd hung it on a hanger last night, because Garvin was so neat. She had to make an effort to remember little things like hanging her dress up when he was around. Untidiness irritated Garvin.

She didn't want to upset him. Whatever he was, strange and quick and brilliant and therefore bewildering to her, she figured Garvin was all she had. And she wasn't getting any younger.

She was glad he had found her. When he'd gone to prison, she had made no conscious effort to hide against the day he would get out. She hadn't thought that far ahead. Five years was too long a time in the misty future.

She knew he hadn't had much trouble finding her. She'd left forwarding addresses. Her mother still lived on a farm in central Georgia and wrote to Theda occasionally. Theda liked to get the letters, except those in which her mother asked her to come home. She hadn't been home in a long time. Sometimes she wanted very much to go back, to the silent nights and quiet rolling acres she'd once hated because they seemed to stifle her . . . the world had seemed a different place then.

She knew she'd never go back now. Her mother was old and ill and too grim a reminder of what lay ahead for Theda. Her mother was only seventeen years older than she.

She laid her dress across the bed and went in the bathroom to pat cold water on her face.

I really got the blues, she thought. I wish Garvin hadn't left me alone here in the room. Don't he know I get willies being left alone like this?

She returned to the bedroom and began dressing. Now that she was moving about, she felt a little less depressed.

Her thoughts kept her feeling better.

I need to be thinking of the job ahead. Garvin said to think about it, until it lost its scare. We're going to kidnap the little boy, all right. Only nothing will happen to him. Garvin promised that. Everything's going to be fine. We'll get a roll from Joseph Littleton and settle someplace for the rest of our days.

Settle for the rest of our days.

She felt faintly sick. Same routine day after day; then death. But you got to accept it.

She'd never stayed in one place long. There'd always been jobs. Cigarettes to sell in a nightclub, hash to sling, a man to cook for until the roof blew off in a final argument. Never in one place long —except at the Littleton's. She'd

got the domestic job there and stayed for nearly four years; because of the little boy. She'd even kept herself neat and guarded her vocabulary against gutter language because the little boy loved and trusted her.

Respected her.

Nobody else had ever done that before.

Maybe I ought to tell Garvin how much I love that kid, she thought. Impress on him, so he'll be sure and remember his promise.

But if she rode Garvin much, he'd get sore. Everything had to be done Garvin's way. She guessed that was best. Garvin had brains and she'd never been long on sense. Only—remembering that didn't always help.

She was dressed now. She left the room, walked down the gloomy stairway, crossed the lobby with its broken-down old leather furniture, and came out in the bright heat of the day.

She started down the sidewalk toward a restaurant. She noticed the two young Cuban boys lounging in the doorway of a private club where old Cuban men played dominoes endlessly.

The boys stopped talking to glance at her. She knew they were stripping her with their eyes.

I feel a lot better now, out and moving around. I think I can eat some breakfast. Meantime, I got to think about it. We're going to snatch that kid. We'll be rich . . . once we kidnap the Littleton boy.

III

GARVIN HAD breakfast in a downtown cafeteria just off Franklin Street. When he came out of the restaurant, he walked the short half block to Florida Avenue and caught an outbound bus. He rode out Florida to the used car district and strolled past lots filled with seemingly endless acres of cars.

He examined three cars before he found the light gray sedan. The car was six years old, a popular make. It had been well cared for. The tires were good, the front wheels stood true and the motor seemed in excellent condition.

"I'd like to try this one out," Garvin told the salesman.

He drove out Florida to Hillsborough, crossed the river, and gave the car gas. It handled well, accelerator and steering wheel quick and eager at his touch.

A few miles beyond Hillsborough, he waited for a break in traffic, U-turned, and drove the car back to the lot.

"I'll look around," he said, handing the salesman the keys.

He walked away before the salesman could get launched on a spiel. He walked away with the license number and location of the car on the lot firmly in mind.

The price of the car—$595—

was chalked in large numbers on the windshield.

It could be had for five hundred, perhaps a little less in a cash deal, Garvin decided. That sum was a large chunk of the bankroll, but a dependable car was a *must*.

Garvin caught a bus and returned downtown. A second bus took him near the hotel in Ybor City. It was almost noon when he went up to his room. Theda was sitting near the window, reading a magazine. She dropped the periodical and got to her feet quickly.

"Missed you," she smiled.

"Yeah," Garvin said.

He closed the door, hung his coat in the closet, and went in the bathroom for a cold face wash. The heat outside was intolerable.

He came out of the bathroom and stood before the bureau combing his hair. His hands moved gently, and he held the comb between him and the window to see how much hair the comb contained before he cleaned it and put it in his hip pocket.

Theda was sitting on the side of the bed watching him.

"I've got an errand for you," he said.

He took out his wallet, counted five hundred dollars on the bed.

"There's a car out on Florida Avenue I want you to buy," he said. "In the four thousand, three hundred block, at a place with big streamers across the front announcing to the world that Happy Harry, the Horseface, is ready to give his eyeteeth away. You can't miss the place. The car is a light, four-door sedan, gray in color, license number Florida, seventy dash, nine, six, eight. It's in the third row of cars, near the rear of the lot.

"The asking price is five ninety five, but you can do a lot better for cash. Watch yourself and do nothing that would make the salesman remember you. Take your time and act natural. Buy the car under the name of Clara Canaday. Got all that?"

"Maybe you'd better write down the license number, Garvin."

"Nix. You're not supposed to know the number. You're to show no interest in the license. Just walk around the car and check the number during your inspection of the car." His lips twisted. "Fine damn thing if you walked in there and took a slip of paper out of your purse to check the number. That salesman would never forget you."

"I'll do it right, Garvin. I promise."

"You'd better. Now take the money and go on out there. Remember the license, seventy dash, nine, six, eight. Repeat it over and over until you can't forget."

She stood up and nodded. Her lips silently formed the numbers.

"Pick me up at the corner of Florida and Hillsborough at three o'clock sharp," he said.

Theda nodded and went out, her lips still framing the license number.

Garvin looked at the closed door for a moment. Then he opened the closet to get his coat.

The car was the first tool. Now he would avail himself of the second. A gun.

With just the right, experienced approach, buying a gun in any large city is little more complicated than buying a bottle of milk, Garvin knew. He anticipated little trouble in the purchase. And he had none.

He found the gun he wanted in a grubby pawnshop a cautiously safe distance from the hotel. The owner was a wizened old man living like a pack rat in the rear of his nest.

Garvin felt the balance of the .38 revolver. Good. He broke the gun down, pointed it toward the light. The barrel and cylinder were in good condition. He snapped the gun. The action was perfect.

Somebody had loved this tool, oiling it, babying it. Garvin found it natural to wonder fleetingly what dire necessity had forced the owner to part with a weapon so loved that not a speck of rust could be found on it or in it.

"Forty dol'," the old man behind the counter said.

"Thirty."

The old man pouched his lips outward, shrugged, and reached for the gun.

Garvin wouldn't give it up.

"All right," he said. "I'll pay the forty, if you'll throw in thirty rounds of ammo."

The old man reached under the counter, brought out a box, and counted the slugs out on the counter.

Garvin pocketed bullets and gun, and paid the old man.

The bell on the door tinkled as Garvin went out and the old man had already disappeared in the depths of his musty cavern.

Garvin returned to his hotel room, loaded the gun, and wrapped the remaining bullets in a handkerchief. He knotted the corners of the handkerchief with a slipknot and carried gun and bullets into the bathroom. He hid them by sliding them under the old-fashioned bathtub.

Theda was right on time with the car. Garvin saw the sedan swing out of traffic toward the curb. He moved across the sidewalk and was in the front seat beside her the moment the car stopped.

Theda put the car in gear and they moved northward with traffic.

"I did real good," she said.

"How much?"

"Four seventy-five. I drove the car around the block, came back and offered the man that, and he took it."

"Fine," Garvin said. He picked up her purse, took out the remain-

ing twenty-five dollars, and dropped the purse back on the seat between them.

"I want to see this lake place," he said.

"It's out U. S. Forty-one, just before you get to Lutz. You want to drive?"

"I'd prefer to memorize the lay of the land."

The smart man, Garvin believed, always had an unlocked rear door behind him. As they rode along, he studied the flat, palmetto-grown terrain, every building, each cross road. Some of the cross roads, he knew, led to Cracker churches, or fishing camps, or petered out in the swampy country. Others connected with highways east and west of Route 41.

He would spend hours tonight studying a map of the entire area, guided by his first-hand observation. The way a spider plots a web with many escape routes. The thought appealed to him.

Theda turned left off the highway. They were now on a shell-surfaced road that led through towering pines heavy with hanging Spanish moss. The sun was far less bright and intense here.

The road made a sweeping turn northward, hiding the surrounding countryside from view from the highway.

Half a mile from the highway, Theda braked the car, and sat with her knuckles white on the steering wheel. "There's the lake —and house," she said, her voice a trifle unsteady.

The lake was a long finger of water south and west of the road. It was hemmed by a heavy growth of pines, cypress and palmetto, a veritable jungle. One side of the lake was apparently very shallow, heavily overgrown with rushes and cat-tails.

The house was a long redwood rancher built in a clearing near the end of the lake. The grounds covered several acres. There was a double garage attached to the house by a screened playroom. Down at the lake's edge was a plank pier and boathouse. Beyond that, a stretch of beach made by hauling in truckloads of sand on the deep side of the lake. Just offshore on the deep side was a diving tower.

The day hummed with a silence broken only by teeming insect life busy in the heat.

"This road we're on," Garvin said. "Is it a state road?"

"I think so," Theda said.

"Does it connect with U. S. Nineteen west of here?"

"I think so."

Garvin's lips thinned and he glanced away from Theda. Damn you, he thought, don't you *know* anything?

"Mr. Littleton's land lays on both sides of the highway," Theda said. "He owns about a thousand acres here."

"It's good to know that," Garvin said.

He took a final look at the layout. He didn't like the way the driveway from the shell road dead-ended at the double garage. Aside from that, everything was perfect, if the road went on to connect with 19. He was certain it did, but he'd confirm it when he studied the map.

IV

IF GARVIN HAD believed in Fortune, Destiny or any supernatural power, he might have concluded that the gods were smiling on him. The house was made to order. He located it Wednesday afternoon. He'd left Tampa alone early in the morning to scout the portions of the state immediately west and north of Tampa.

The house was a sun-baked cottage with a long screened porch. It was secluded, a fishing cottage facing the Pithlochascotee River about thirty miles from Tampa as the crow would fly northwest by north. The cottage was reached by a rutted, sandy access road that arced off a state highway. The highway linked with U. S. 19, U. S. 41, and state road 39. These in turn formed links that branched to all parts of the state. It was the best kind of escape network.

Like a spider, Garvin could move in several directions from the cottage along the spokes of the web. It gave him a certain comfort.

The cottage was owned by an old, half-blind Cracker named Ramey. A real estate man in Denham, a sere whistle stop, had given Garvin the lead on Ramey. "An old farmer," the agent had said. "He's got a fishing shack like you want. You can drive over and see if the place is empty."

Garvin had stopped at the farm and Ramey had driven up with him.

"Used to come up here myself," Ramey said, "until my eyes got bad and my joints got to creaking. Plenty of good fishing, Mr. Conover. And real quiet."

Garvin was back in Tampa by six o'clock, a receipt for a week's rent in his pocket.

He went up to the hotel room. Theda jumped from her chair at the window. She went pale. For a moment it looked as if she would faint from relief.

"Lord, Garvin, I thought you'd never get back!"

"I told you I might be gone all day."

"I know. But cooped up here all alone. —"

"You should have gotten out. Now spruce up a little. Everything's set. By this time tomorrow it'll all be over. Where would you like to eat?"

Theda stood rigid. The corner of her mouth was twitching. She rubbed her hand over her eyes.

"Could you bring me something up, Garvin?"

"Why?"

"I feel dizzy. I don't know if I can get out or not."

He watched her, heat building in his eyes. Then suddenly his eyes were cold "I thought I could count on you."

"You can, Garvin! Only right now I don't feel so good. I keep thinking about the boy."

He crossed the room and stood close to her. Very quietly he said, "Listen, everything has gone perfect so far. It's all falling in place the way things do once in a lifetime. I'm not going to let anything louse it up. Get a grip on yourself. Remember it means our whole future."

"I'll try, Garvin. I been trying. Thinking about it the way you said. Only the fright won't go away from thinking. It just gets worse. Please, couldn't I have a drink? Only one, to steady me."

"I'll get a bottle of sleeping pills," Garvin said. "You can take your edge off with one of those."

He touched her arm and pushed her toward the bathroom. She went obediently and Garvin stood in the bedroom watching her splash cold water on her face.

He woke with the feeling that the hour was very late. He'd retired early and despite Theda's restlessness had blanked his mind and willed himself to go to sleep immediately.

He was instantly alert. Light suffused the bedroom from the bath. He was irritated with Theda for waking him. They had to be in prime condition for the job ahead tomorrow.

Then as he sat up in bed to call to her, he saw what she was doing. She was standing at the basin, spilling almost the entire contents of the sleeping pill bottle into her hand.

He was out of bed with the quickness of a cat. She heard him, turned her head to look at him. By then he was beside her. He grabbed her wrist.

"You fool!" he said with such intensity that she cringed away. "You weak, stupid fool!"

Her eyes were blank and depthless. Her head rolled from side to side. Her face was so thin it looked as if she'd lost fifteen pounds in the last thirty hours. "I got to get some sleep, Garvin. I've got to."

"Swallow those, and you'll sleep for all time," Garvin said.

He stood holding her wrist while she slumped to a half-sagging position. Raw contempt flooded his eyes. He raised his free hand as if he would strike her.

You need her tomorrow, a voice within him warned.

He controlled himself with an effort, slipped his arm about her and led her into the bedroom.

"Everything's going to be all right, Theda," he whispered reas-

suringly. "Just get hold of yourself."

"Garvin, the little boy—"

"Don't worry about the kid. Don't think about him anymore. Maybe it was wrong for you to think about it at all. I should have sent you to a movie or downtown shopping."

He turned her and set her gently on the bed. She sat with her shoulders pulled in, her knees close together. Her slip was a sweat-drenched outer skin.

She raised her eyes. "You do love me, Garvin."

"You know I do."

"You wouldn't leave me or anything?"

"Don't be silly."

"You're all I've got now, Garvin. I had the Littletons and the boy for awhile, but the minute you came back I had to give up all that. I couldn't help myself. It all started stifling me. And then you said we were going to snatch the kid and . . . Garvin, couldn't we just go away together?"

"Are you crazy?"

She looked at the floor. "I wish it was all over."

"It will be soon. Now take a couple of these and forget it."

Theda was calmer the next morning. Garvin decided that it was a calm arising from an abnormal state of mind—a feeling of being dazed, and so emotionally overwrought that nothing seemed quite real to her.

He watched her eat breakfast mechanically. He judged that the strange calm would last for several hours. Long enough, if no completely shattering experience arose to jolt her out of it.

Unhurriedly, they came from the restaurant and walked to the parking lot for the car. Garvin glanced at his watch after they'd got in the car and he'd started the motor.

Almost nine o'clock.

She had told him that Helen Macy, the governess, and the little boy always went to the lake cottage early when the Littletons were planning a long weekend out there. The little boy was always that eager to get to the lake and his parents were indulgent.

Mrs. Littleton would follow later in the day with groceries and any other household supplies they might need. She would be chauffeured by Samuel, the colored house man. She was a late sleeper and by the time she had risen, done her shopping and driven out, she would usually arrive at the cottage about mid-afternoon.

Mr. Littleton, a food broker who handled much of the stuff that came into port in Tampa from South America, would work a long day to leave his office shipshape until Monday or Tuesday morning. He would not reach the cottage until dinner time. Occasionally, he took his private secretary out with him, if it seemed some-

thing of vital importance might come up over the weekend. He could brief her and let her return to the city. But it was not often the secretary was a member of the party.

As he drove north on Route 41, Garvin recalled each detail Theda had given him about the Littletons.

Mrs. Littleton was a quiet woman who spent a great deal of time in charitable work. A registered private nurse when she had met Mr. Littleton, she worked a few hours each week at the clinic attached to a local hospital. The work to which she was most devoted was that carried on by a foundling home. She worked a regular afternoon schedule at the home and might be found scrubbing a floor if no one else were available.

Theda had described Mrs. Littleton as being "Well, kind of beautiful without being pretty . . . good figure, good face, but mostly it's the way she walks and talks and smiles that makes her look so nice."

Joseph Littleton had been born to wealth and by leading an active business life had increased his fortune greatly. He came from a pioneer Florida family, being the son of an army officer who'd first seen a fledgling Tampa as an embarkation point for active duty in Cuba during the Spanish-American war. Littleton the first had sensed opportunity in the undeveloped tropical land and had settled in Tampa after the war to become a man known and liked throughout the state.

Faced with the task of making an analysis of the fine points of character, Theda had stammered and given up. But she'd given Garvin enough for him to fill in the details.

Littleton, Garvin visualized, was genteel and therefore soft. He was several years older than his wife and many years older than the kid. He worshipped them both. He would feel a fear for that kid that few men would or could feel.

Littleton would be putty.

V

GARVIN TURNED off the side road and the lake cottage came into view. A black sedan was parked in the driveway. The governess and the kid were here.

Garvin braked the light sedan on the shell-surfaced state road.

"We'll walk to the house," he said. "No use going into the cul-de-sac of that driveway."

He glanced at Theda. She was pale. Her eyes were hollow. But she nodded.

"You know what you're to do?" Garvin said.

Again she nodded.

Garvin opened the door on his side of the car. "All right, let's go."

As he walked along the driveway slightly behind Theda, he unbuttoned the third button of his shirt. By sliding his hand under the shirt he could reach the loaded revolver where it rested behind the waist-band of his trousers. He had given the gun a final check and placed it there before leaving the hotel. Carried in such a manner it was readily accessible and, with his tropical sack coat buttoned securely over it made no lump to reveal its resting place.

Garvin saw the boy. The kid was at the edge of the lake, hunkered with a long twig in his hand. He was worrying the tadpoles in the shallows and laughing at their antics.

The boy saw them and stood up. He was a slender, wiry kid, Garvin noted, quick and agile. A very healthy youngster with a butch haircut, lively eyes, and an intelligent face.

"Hi, Theda," he yelled and ran toward them.

"Hello, little Joe," Theda said. Her voice shook. She took the little boy's outstretched hand.

Joe gave Garvin only a glance. He launched into a description of the remarkable way some of the tadpoles in the lake were growing hind legs.

"They'll be frogs soon," Theda said.

A cool-looking young woman in skirt, blouse, and flat-heeled shoes came to the front door of the cottage. She was attractive without being particularly feminine or pretty. Her hair was dark and cut short, her skin olive. She wore glasses with heavy black rims.

"Helen," little Joe called, "Theda's come to visit us." He looked up at Theda. "Haven't you, Theda?"

"Maybe," Theda said.

"We want you to stay with us again. Don't we, Helen?"

Helen Macy, the governess, said, "That's up to Theda." Glancing past Theda, she let her gaze linger a moment on Garvin's face.

They were at the front door of the cottage now, the little boy standing spreadlegged on one side of Theda, Garvin slightly behind her.

"This is Mr. Conover," Theda said. "He brought me up, Helen."

"I see. Won't you come in?"

Helen Macy held the screen door wide. Joe, Theda, and Garvin filed past her.

Helen let the door swing closed. "Did you wish to see Mr. or Mrs. Littleton?" she asked Theda.

"I thought I'd see if Mrs. Littleton would take me back," Theda said.

"She might," Helen said without inflection. She seemed the sort of person who carried her emotions well away from the surface. Garvin pegged her as the bookish, tweedy sort. "She probably won't be here until late afternoon."

"Oh," Theda said. Garvin saw

the pulse hammering in her throat. She was perspiring so much her blouse was turning dark with the moisture. Anxiety was building in her eyes.

Don't break, Garvin thought. Damn you, keep a grip on yourself.

But he knew Theda wouldn't be able to keep up the pretense much longer.

Helen Macy invited them to sit down. "I'll get something cool to drink," she said.

"I want a bottle of pop," little Joe said. "We'll have a party!"

Helen smiled briefly at his enthusiasm. She turned to walk out of the room.

Garvin's hand disappeared under his shirt. He pulled the gun and stepped close behind the governess. His arm swept downward.

He meant for her to go down and stay down. He didn't give a damn how hard he hit her.

Her knees snapped toward each other, and she pitched forward. She lay on the carpet of the living room as if she were dead.

Theda stood numb. Then, suddenly, she began to shake.

The little boy stared at the governess. "You're a mean man," he said to Garvin.

Garvin grabbed the boy's arm. Little Joe screamed and kicked him in the shins.

Garvin backhanded the kid across the face and knocked him down.

"Get him to the car," Garvin said.

Theda was gasping for breath. "Garvin—"

"You heard what I said. It's too late to turn back now."

Theda picked the boy up. He was dazed. "There, there," Theda said. Little Joe didn't hear her. He writhed in her arms and tried to crawl over her shoulder. Like a child in a delirium, made suddenly uncontrollable by a raging fever.

"Get him to the car!" Garvin shouted.

"All right," Theda said. She went out of the cottage carrying the boy.

Garvin waited until Theda had time to reach the car. He dropped the gun in his left coat pocket. From his right side pocket he pulled a pair of rubber gloves. So far, he had touched nothing in the cottage to leave fingerprints.

With the gloves on, he opened a door off the short hallway. He had located a bedroom. He entered the room, crossed to the bed, and picked up a pillow.

With the pillow in his hand, he returned to the living room. As he stood over her, Helen Macy moaned softly and tried to move.

Garvin held the gun in his right hand and folded the pillow around his hand and the gun. He kneeled beside the governess and very carefully rested gun and pillow against the base of her skull.

He pulled the trigger.

The bullet passed through her brain and knocked a piece of bone out of the top of her skull the size of a fifty cent piece.

Garvin stood up, dropped the pillow beside her, and put the gun under his shirt. He stripped off the rubber gloves and returned them to his coat pocket.

He came out of the cottage and walked through the shimmering heat and soft hum of insects to the car.

Theda was in the back seat of the car, holding the boy on her lap. Her face was a dead white. The boy was crying and clinging to her.

"Keep him down out of sight," Garvin said.

He got under the wheel, started the car, and drove at a normal speed to U. S. 41. He turned north and they reached the fishing cottage he'd rented about fifteen minutes later.

He stopped the car in front of the cottage.

"Take him inside and keep him out of sight," Garvin said. "Not one chance in a million that anybody will show up around here, but keep him away from windows and doors."

Joe's crying had run down to jerky sobs. "I want to go home, Theda. Please take me home. He's a bad man. He hit Helen."

"I know," Theda said. The flesh across her cheekbones was pulled so tight it looked waxen. "Just be a good boy, Joe, and I'll send for your mama."

"Honest?"

"Honest. Now let's go in this little house here and see if we can play some games."

Garvin waited impatiently for them to get out. He watched Theda lead the four-year-old boy into the cottage; then he started the car again.

He drove at the lower edge of the speed limit until he was in the northern edges of Tampa. He pulled into the parking area of a shopping center, parked the car and walked into a crowded drugstore. He moved casually, with no appearance of strain.

A bank of four phone booths was in the rear of the store. Garvin checked the phone number in one of the directories at the end of the booths. He entered the single empty booth and dialed.

The little overhead fan in the booth hummed gently while the phone rang twice at the other end.

A crisp feminine voice said, "Littleton Food Brokerage."

"Mr. Littleton, please," Garvin said.

"Mr. Littleton is busy. May I—"

"Not too busy for this," Garvin said. "It concerns his kid."

"Just a moment."

The moment was not a long one. "Joseph Littleton speaking," the voice was soft and cultured. "My secretary says—"

"Never mind what your secretary or anybody else says," Garvin rasped. "Just listen, because you're going to hear the most important words you've ever heard in your whole life."

"I don't believe—"

"Shut up and listen!" Garvin said without raising his voice. "I've got your kid and I'm going to kill him unless you do exactly as I say."

He paused, but Littleton was unable to speak.

"I picked up the kid at your lake cottage," Garvin said. "He's unharmed. You'll get him back that way if you follow my instructions to the letter.

"You've got precisely two hours and thirty minutes to save the kid's life. Get together one hundred thousand dollars in small, unmarked bills. Package them tightly and put the pack in an old gunny sack. You'll have gunny sacking at your warehouse. Tie the mouth of the sack with an old cord.

"Put the sack in your car and drive east from Tampa on U. S. Ninety-two. A few miles out you'll reach the secondary road that turns north to the village of Thonotosassa. Turn north on that road. In a few minutes you'll reach a secondary crossroad. Stop your car there. Get out. If anything is visible on the highway pretend you're examining your tires until the other car passes. If the highway is deserted, carry the gunny sack thirty paces northwest, drop it in the field, and return to your car.

"Drive back to Tampa. Say nothing to anyone. At ten o'cock tomorrow morning you'll get a phone call where to pick up the kid.

"If you ring in the cops or fail to deliver, I'll know. You make the slightest slip and you'll never hear from me again. You'll find your kid in pieces.

"To keep everything perfectly clear I'll tell you about the kid's governess. She's out at your lake cottage with a hole blown in her head. You can tell the cops about that after ten o'clock tomorrow.

"There'll be no calls after this one, if you fail. No second chance, Littleton, if you fail the first time. I mean business. I killed the governess in cold blood and I'm ready to kill the kid . . . Now you'd beter get moving."

Garvin hung up quickly.

He came out of the confines of the booth, glanced at his watch, and strolled to the soda fountain. The booth had been extremely hot. Something tall and cool would go well at the moment.

"A limeade," he told the white-starched waitress. "Better make it a large one."

VI

GARVIN REMAINED parked near a screen of pines on the east-west secondary road until he saw the

dust streamer of a car northbound toward Thonotosassa.

He judged the speed of the other car from the dust and started the motor of the light gray sedan.

A Caddy was drawn up at the road crossing when Garvin drove past. A slender man with a shock of gray hair had got out of the Caddy and was stooping to look at the tires.

Garvin smiled grimly and turned south. He took care to keep well within the speed limit.

He was standing inside a filling station sipping a cold drink when he saw the Caddy pass on U. S. 92, heading toward Tampa.

He finished the drink and went out to the sedan where he had parked it in a short row of cars on the far side of the concrete apron.

He turned the light car, joined traffic eastbound on 92 and turned north on the Thonotosassa road.

He was alone in a desolate, sun-scorched landscape. The road ahead looked like a lake in the heat, a lake that hovered a constant distance away.

He crossed the intersection of the two secondary roads, slowed, and scanned the landscape. No other car was visible. No vehicles coming up behind him. No vehicles had entered the northbound side-road from the moment he'd come out of it until he had returned.

Littleton had taken no chances, rung in no cops.

I made a believer of that boy, Garvin thought.

He parked the gray sedan and jerked the rubber gloves on his hands.

This was the one really crucial moment, the moment when he might be seen taking the money, tying him directly to the snatch. A farmer or somebody from the village on their way back from a Tampa shopping tour could play a lot of hell right now.

Garvin jumped out of the car, and crossed several paces into the field. Shiny green palmetto fronds slashed at his legs.

The green growth provided a good hiding place for the money. The casual onlooker would never know it was there.

The first tremor came into Garvin's hands when he squatted and jerked open the gunny sack. The money was packaged in brown paper.

He tore the wrapping loose and stuffed the money under his shirt. He let the wrapping and cord lay where they were. He backed out of the field, swinging the sack and sweeping out his tracks.

On the road he threw the sack into a ditch, got in the car, started it, and turned around in the intersection. He began to breathe more freely when he was back on Route 92. He'd taken off the rubber gloves. They lay in his lap.

He melted into city traffic and forty minutes later was out of it

again, moving north on 41. He drove slowly. Cars whizzed past him. He watched the rear-view mirror and during a moment when no cars were close behind he dropped the gloves out the window.

He reached the turnoff to the fishing cottage. The road was deserted. He drove half a mile, stopped the car, and got out slowly.

He opened the rear door, lifted the rear seat, and laid the money on the floor, making a carpet of it. Then he replaced the rear seat, making sure it was hooked properly and was snug. He got under the wheel and started on.

He laughed. It was a strange sound, and short-lived. But it was genuine. Garvin felt wonderful.

True, one final detail remained. It could be attended to easily. Then he would have until ten o'clock tomorrow to vanish. How very damn simple it had all been, he thought. He'd planned well. He'd struck ruthlessly. He was a rich man.

I really can't take credit for all of it, he thought. I owe the public a little. It was the public that had fed him for five years while the necessary resolve hardened inside of him.

Five years well spent, he reflected.

During the five years he had planned scores, hundreds, of crimes. Setting up hypothetical situations, poring over every detail for flaws.

He hadn't known then what the Big One might eventually be. He'd known only that he would find it and that his mind would be trained to evaluate it, and make every necessary plan. And that his hands, senses, instincts would be prepared to take any measure which might be needed to insure the plan's success.

He turned on the access road, and parked close to the cottage.

Theda jerked the cottage door open before he got out of the car. She ran across the short stretch of yard to meet him. Her hands gripped his arm. Her mouth worked convulsively.

"It's all over, Garvin?"

"Just about. I got the dough. Where is the kid?"

"Taking a nap. I finally got him to sleep by convincing him his mother would be here when he woke up if he went to sleep."

VII

GARVIN ENTERED the cottage. Theda followed anxiously. In the dusty, wicker furnished living room, he paused. "In there?" he said, pointing to a closed door.

"Yes, but let him sleep, Garvin."

He turned and opened the door gently. The bedroom was furnished with an old iron bed, a chest of drawers and a washstand.

Theda had pulled the cracked

green shades and the room was dimly lit, hot and close.

On the bed little Joe stirred restlessly.

"Garvin, please let him sleep," Theda whispered. "He was so scared."

"I just want to have a look at him," Garvin said. His face was a chalk-white blob in the gloom of the room.

He tiptoed to the side of the bed. His hand went beneath his shirt.

"My God " Theda said.

"Stay back, Theda."

"No—a child. You can't!"

"Shut up. He could recognize, identify me."

"Wait! Listen to me!" Her voice was a soft scream. "You can't. There's something you don't know. Something I was afraid to tell you. *He's your own kid, Garvin.*"

He looked at her. A white ring grew around his lips. "You're lying. You couldn't have kept it from me— You're lying, I say."

"No, I'm not." Sweat was streaking through what makeup remained on her face. Her straw blond hair was plastered to her forehead and the sides of her thin white face. "When you got in trouble, I discovered he was on his way. I never thought what might happen in the future. I never thought I'd see you again. You were in prison and I drifted south, working until my time was come. He was born in Tampa, and I knew you'd never want him, and I thought I wouldn't either. He was just a drag on me. I put him in a foundling home. That's where Mrs. Littleton saw him for the first time, while he was real small and helpless."

"I don't believe it," Garvin said.

"How much proof do you need? How was it the Littletons—had lived together all those years and then when he was old they had a baby? They adopted one, Garvin, because they'd given up hope of having their own."

Tears were mingled with the sweat on her face. "I got sick and had to have some post-natal care. I had no money left by then and had to go back to the charity home. While I was there, sick and alone, I got to missing him. Wondering what he looked like, if he was doing okay. The nurses told me somebody had already adopted him.

"When I was able to move around I watched my chance and went in the office one day when the super was out. I saw the record, Garvin, and knew where my kid was. *My kid and yours.*

"I told myself I'd just have to forget him. But I couldn't. I'd never been a mother before and I didn't know I'd feel the way I did. I took a job as a waitress until I got some decent looking clothes. Then I managed to meet Mrs. Littleton and went to work for them. Of course she never knew I was Joe's mother."

Her words stopped and she stood simply looking at Garvin.

He raised his gun hand and wiped sweat from his face. "I know you're lying," he said. "You would have told me."

"I loved you. I knew everything was going to be different when you came back. Your coming back turned all my time at the Littletons into a dream. And I was scared. And you swore you wouldn't hurt the little boy. You might have guessed—if you'd known anything about how a mother would feel. It was building up in me a long time. He wasn't just any kid. He was *my* baby—"

They stood, their eyes holding. The bedsprings creaked as little Joe turned over. But neither of them looked toward the bed.

A shiver passed over Theda's shoulders. "You meant it when you promised about the kid, Garvin?"

"You're lying," he said.

Her gaze still held his. "I see," she said softly. She was silent several seconds. "I see," she said again. "I've been a fool. The only thing you meant was when you said it had to be hard and fast and completely without mercy.

"I wouldn't fit in this future you've planned, would I, Garvin? I don't look genteel enough. I might fix up and get by on that score. But something I could never fix up is the fact that I'd know. Who you were, what you had done.

"You've planned to leave me the way you left the governess, haven't you, Garvin? The way you'd leave your own kid?"

"He's not my kid!" Garvin shouted. "You're lying. Lying!"

A flame was in his eyes. He spun toward the bed, the gun coming down. Little Joe woke, began screaming, and wriggled toward the edge of the bed.

Garvin brought the gun to bear and Theda leaped on him.

She was cursing softly and savagely as she grabbed for the gun. She had both hands on the gun wrist, pressing Garvin back with her fury and her weight.

He squeezed the trigger and her body took the slug and muffled the sound. But she didn't let go. She kicked Garvin and they fell across the bed.

Then she bit his cheek. He felt the skin tear, heard the soft crunching sound of her teeth meeting in his flesh. The pain blinded him. He closed his eyes and gagged as the pain tore through his head.

He reached up to tear her away, and she pulled loose from him.

She had the gun, and he lay for a moment, holding his cheek and trying to focus his eyes on her as she stood up.

She was dying on her feet as she leveled the gun on Garvin and pulled the trigger.

She let the gun fall to the floor. Holding herself under her left breast where Garvin had shot her,

she managed to walk to the doorway.

Little Joe was standing in the middle of the room crying.

"Joe . . ."

"Where is mama? I want to go home."

"Then go to the highway, Joe. Start walking, and when you reach a house tell the people who you are. You'll see your mother then. You understand all that?"

"Yes, m'am."

"Can you do it?"

"Yes, m'am."

"Hurry now," she said.

A STATEMENT TO THE POLICE by Frank Selsey

(Concluded from page 93)

ing up a puzzling point that—as I see from the record—caused no little conjecture at the time. I mean the two extra bullets in the body, in addition to the one—of different calibre—that caused the fatal wound."

Herris gasped. "A bullet—of different calibre?"

"Just so, Mr. Herris. Ridge—who was more involved in the losses than you believed—shot himself through the heart an hour before you fired at his body. Oh, yes, he left a note. But he was wearing a red dressing-gown, you see . . . Your wife went there to make a final break with him. So her statement says, and I believe it. Naturally she had a shock, and just ran away . . . like you . . .

"By the way, you'd better turn that gun in, if you still know where it is. The way you placed those shots wouldn't have killed a rabbit. I won't detain you, Mr. Herris. Your wife's been waiting long enough."

You've been asking for it! You'll get it next month!
The long-awaited Michael Shayne book-length novel.

An Extra Cup of Coffee

There are circumstances so tormenting that even a good cop . . . may make a tragic mistake.

by BOB BRISTOW

JOHN CRAMER paused at the door to Danny's room. For a long moment before he closed the door, he studied the serene face of his son. It was a face with the special kind of serenity unique to a tired happy boy of six—a boy who had

© 1960, by Bob Bristow

miraculously been given a special, invaluable gift. Danny Cramer, for the first time in three years, could see again.

He was too young to know the sacrifices that had been necessary to pay for the operation on the optic nerves. And Officer John Cramer hoped that he would never know the mark of shame that was associated with the money that had made the operation possible.

John, rubbing his square jaw with his thumb, left the door and sat in the big chair beside the radio. He listened to the rock-and-roll chant for a few minutes and lighted a cigarette. *He had to tell it.* He couldn't keep it bottled up inside him any longer.

He slipped out of his shoes and moved his feet uneasily on the floor. When he glanced at his wife, he saw that she was frowning. She was a small woman, slightly over five feet tall. She was not really a pretty woman, except to him. Her hair, she complained, was so straight she had decided against further attempts at a permanent wave. She wore it short.

Her eyes were her saving feature. Very brown they were, very soft and expressive. John didn't see any defects in his wife. To him, she was beautiful. And Ruth was more than a wife. She was, very simply, his friend. He knew a lot of men who could not say that about their wives.

"John . . . that's almost a package of cigarettes you've smoked since you've been home."

"I know." He shrugged and sighed. The nasal singer on the radio pounded furiously at his guitar.

"What is it?" Ruth asked. "What's troubling you, John?"

Cramer sighed. She sat, her feet curled under her on the worn sofa. She was almost smiling, *Almost.*

"I've got to tell it sooner or later," he said. "You won't like it."

"Try me."

His throat was dry from too many cigarettes and his head was aching. "Ruth . . ." his voice was unsteady. "I took a bribe."

Her eyes were very intent on him. He waited for a shocked reaction, but none came. It was as though they were both waiting for something terrible to happen.

"That last two hundred dollars I got for the operation. I told you the boys at the station passed the hat a second time. They didn't. They'd all given more than they could spare the first time. I got the money from Maxie Routt. I took it in the hallway of an apartment house on the beat."

"There were strings?"

"Always strings," he said. "He told me he was sorry about Danny. Even now, to tell the truth, I think in his own way he *was* sorry. But he had an angle. He said he knew that I passed the Supermarket on East Seventh Street at nine

every night, just at closing time. He'd been watching me, keeping track.

"He told me that it would be nice if I got a little behind in my schedule next Tuesday. He said it would be helpful if I didn't make it to the Supermarket until nine-thirty or so. And all the time he was holding this plain white envelope in his hand, and when I started to give him the riot act, he dropped it. The bills fell out at his feet. He looked at me then—and he said that he hoped to God Danny got his sight back."

John coughed, and lighted another cigarette. "Ruth . . . I was furious. I told him to come back and pick up the money. Then he said for me to pick it up, and if I couldn't use it to drop it in his mailbox. He just walked away. I picked up the envelope and put the money back inside. I got as far as his mailbox, and that was it.

"I kept thinking that my Danny had just as much right to see as any other kid. I kept remembering how hard it had been to save and sacrifice and take charity, only to wind up a couple of hundred dollars short. Ruth . . . I was thinking that it wouldn't be too tough to have an extra cup of coffee while I was making the beat. That's all. Just have an extra cup and talk with Smitty at the Coffee Shop for awhile. Until nine-thirty. So I put the money in my pocket. I turned my head."

Ruth leaned toward him, as if she were going to ask him something important. Instead she asked for a cigarette. He lighted one and passed it across to her. The glowing tip trembled when she inhaled.

"They held up the store," she said. "I read about it."

"Yes. They got four thousand dollars. And my son got his sight back."

"Johnny, there could have been other ways."

"Sure! He could have waited another year. Missed school while we dropped dimes and quarters in the cookie jar. But that year was important to me. Why should my kid have to wait another year just because his father couldn't raise the money?"

"The doctor said we could pay his bill off in installments."

"That's true. But hospitals aren't run that way. They had to have the money, and the estimate was higher than we thought at first. I was already paying the bank and the loan shark for what they loaned me. There wasn't enough. That's all. Think, Ruth, this is a small city. There aren't any schools for blind kids within three hundred miles. I couldn't stand the idea of sending him away. Besides, we couldn't have paid for that either. We'll be paying off that operation for two years as it is."

"Easy, John."

He leaned back in the large

chair, rubbed his jaw again with his thumb.

"Okay. I know what you're thinking. I'm trying to justify being a cheap grafter, an actual accessory to an armed robbery. I'm making it sound like I should get a boy scout badge for doing it. I know. Who wants to feel filthy?"

"I'm with you, John. But the papers—the owner of the store identified Maxie Routt and two of his boys. They've been picked up. If I remember, the trial date is already set."

"That's right. They got caught, but it wasn't my fault. Maxie knows that. I did what I got paid for."

"Has Maxie told the Chief?"

John shook his head. "I don't think so. That's the thing about Maxie. He knows I did my part. He got caught, that's all. It was a fluke. Why should he blame me? What would he have gained by not keeping quiet aboout the bribe?"

"I can think of a couple of reasons. One, it would enable him to take a good slap at the Police Department. It wouldn't get him off, but it would give him a vicious . . ." She hesitated at the word. "I didn't mean it that way. He could use it as a weapon. Maybe get himself a better deal with the prosecutor."

"He could, but I don't think he will. I've known Maxie for a long time. I knew him when he first started to go bad. But nobody is all bad, Ruth. If I wasn't on the force, I'd like him. In every way except one he's a guy most people would honestly and sincerely like. He simply took the wrong side of the law."

"But when you get down to it, he's rotten to the core."

"No. You make it sound like a cheap B movie with George Raft. He's got dirt on him, sure. But so has everybody up to a point. He's no Robin Hood perhaps but he's been known to do some good things from time to time. He never muggs anybody. He's never pulled a trigger. You might remember if he'd have killed the store owner, the old guy wouldn't be around to testify."

"Johnny, what is this? You talk like a character witness for the defense."

"And that's wrong. You don't have to remind me. I'm just saying that Maxie Routt isn't all black or all white. He's not a type. He's the guy who bribed me. That's who he is. He's a guy who dropped the money, so that Danny . . ."

Cramer stood up and walked to the radio. He changed stations and went back and sat down.

"You're not listening," Ruth said. "Turn it off."

"No. I want the noise while we talk." He studied her face for a moment. "Are you disappointed?" he asked.

"Of course. And I'm afraid that's too mild a word, John."

Cramer averted his eyes. He sighed heavily.

"Okay," he nodded wearily. "I don't blame you. I feel the same way about it when I stand off and take a completely honest look at myself. But Ruth, we'd tried everything. I sold the car. How much does a guy get for a nine-year-old car in poor shape? I sold the TV set and my watch and shotgun. I didn't care about those things. Ruth, I didn't tell you, but I asked the Chief if I could take on an extra job in a drugstore nights, but he said no deal. If something big came up, they'd have to call on everybody."

"Like a supermarket robbery."

"Yeah—like that."

He leaned back in the chair, "I kept thinking one thing. When school started, my kid couldn't go. Not for a year or more because his old man didn't have quite enough money saved up to fix his eyes. I'd come home and he'd be sitting there, and he'd get on my lap and ask me to read the comics. He'd ask me to tell him what Bugs Bunny really looked like. You tell me how to answer questions like that without tearing up inside."

"John, please."

"No—let me say it. I wanted to be a cop. I was a good cop, too. I know that. I'm not stupid either. Maybe I could have taken some other job for more money, except that I'd have been less true to myself. I liked people meeting me with a grin and a pat on the back. They depended on me. Sure, I was no gangbuster, but I was on the ball. I must have been, because the Chief said I had the next promotion. Then the City cut the funds and the promotion fell through. I'd counted on that extra money . . . I've got a headache. Is there any aspirin?"

"No. But I can go next door and borrow some."

"Never mind. I'm used to it now."

"John, I understand why you took it. I feel terrible about it, but I understand. If that helps."

"It helps. But not enough."

"Go on." She was trying to make it easier.

"I don't know what to do. Every day when I pass the supermarket I look in at the manager and he waves. I feel dirty. He's never mentioned that I was late that night. Nobody ever gave it any thought. The Chief has never said a thing. He asks me about Danny. He tells me how great it is that the kid can see again. The radio dispatcher tells me he's got a bunch of picture books his boy has finished and he wonders if Danny would like to have them. All the time I walk around so ashamed I can't think straight.

"Sometimes I tell myself it was worth it. Danny can see. Sure, it was worth it. I couldn't figure out any other way, or I'd never have taken the money. I remember that

the supermarket was insured against robbery and that it didn't really cost the guy a dime. But looking at it that way doesn't do any good. Sometimes I don't think I can go back. And I can't pretend I won't feel this way the rest of my life."

His lips tightened. "The only thing that keeps me going is Danny. But even that hurts. Someday he'll see too much. He'll look at me and he'll know I'm a criminal too. That I took a bribe to turn my head."

Ruth's voice was pitched low. "What are you going to do?"

"It's too late to do anything. The trial is set to come off in a couple of weeks. Maxie is certain to get five to ten years. Maybe I won't feel so rotten when he takes the conviction."

"You want to forget it?"

"That's right."

She sat on the arm of his chair and pulled his head against her. "I don't know anybody who doesn't make mistakes when they are not really themselves. And you were tortured more than most, John. You had a terrible decision to make. I wish I could help you. You sure you don't want the aspirin?"

"No, let it go."

She turned his face and kissed him.

"You did it for Danny. I know what you gave up to save money. And this! Well, you gave up the most important thing. But it was for him. John, I love you so much."

He found comfort in her arms. But later he lay awake, looking out the window while she slept. He watched the street light on the corner. It had helped to tell her. But not enough. Watching the light he rehearsed what he might say to the Chief. He visualized the Chief's face when the incriminating words crossed his lips. "I took a bribe, sir."

The vision of the Chief blurred a little, but the expression on the old man's face did not vanish immediately. It remained harsh, severe and unforgiving. John decided that a confession of guilt was not the answer at all. He'd keep it sealed up inside of him. Nobody would ever know. He'd learned a lesson and his own tormenting sense of guilt was punishment enough.

He'd never mention it again. He'd be the best cop the city had ever had. Somehow he'd save two hundred dollars, if it took five years, and he'd drop it in the cancer fund or the community chest and the debt would be paid. That was the answer. The only answer.

The sky grew bright in the east. It was misting outside and the asphalt streets glistened with moisture in the early morning light. He got up, washed his face in cold water and made coffee. He dressed in his uniform and left the house quietly. He walked the ten blocks to the station.

Chief Hayes had just arrived when he came in.

"You're early," Hayes said, glancing at him, letting his eyes linger for a moment.

"Yeah! I didn't sleep too well."

"Insomnia?" Hayes asked, taking off his coat, and turning his back.

"I guess."

"Come on in the office. We'll have a cup of coffee if the dispatcher has some brewed."

"Sure."

He followed Hayes into the small office and sat down.

"I was thinking," John said. "The guys were more than generous about giving money for Danny and—"

"How is the boy?" the Chief interrupted.

"He's good. It takes time, but he can see pretty well already."

"Swell. You were saying—"

"The other men. Maybe I could do some extra duty—give them some time off to repay them for all they did."

"No! Cramer, they were generous because they respected you and wanted to help. You don't pay for respect."

John lighted a cigarette. *Respect.* He couldn't look away from the desk. He didn't notice when Captain Hayes pushed the cup of coffee across the desk toward him.

"Here," Hayes said. "You must still be sleepy."

John took the cup, and it was not steady in his hands. The Chief grinned at him and looked away.

"It's a strange thing about good policemen. They don't make much. But when one of their kind is in need, they know how to dig deep. That's beside and apart from the fact that they all like you. I think if you'd have needed it, they would have done more. Maybe a pie sale or something."

John felt the hot coffee burning his mouth.

"There was some talk about it. But we all believed you'd saved enough money to make it. When you scheduled the operation, we figured you were over the hump. I thought if you needed more help, you'd have told me."

"Sure . . ."

"Anyway, everybody's glad about your boy. And forget about the extra duty. They were glad to do what they did."

John nodded. His head was aching and a great weariness had come over him. He excused himself when the Chief's phone rang, and he walked out onto the street. The mist was heavier now, cool on his face. He walked along the streets of the small city. *They'd have done more. A pie sale, but you didn't need it. You'd saved enough money to make it.*

The businesses were opening. Hal Davis at the hardware store was washing the display windows as he passed.

"How's the boy?" he asked.

"He's fine," John Cramer said.

"Glad to hear it. We didn't say anything before, but the Lions Club talked about helping out. When we checked, the Chief said he understood you were over the hump. It's a little late, but I just wanted you to know we'd have been glad to give you a hand."

John nodded and his voice was unsteady. "Thanks—thanks."

He turned the corner. *Thanks, Mr. Davis. I didn't tell anybody I didn't have enough money, so you couldn't have really known. I got it though. I took a bribe, you see, and it wasn't necessary.*

He walked on. There were others. Honest, decent men who paused to ask about his son. *They cared.* It was not just courtesy when they mentioned Danny. They honestly cared.

John got through his shift and went home late that evening. Ruth was waiting with hot meat stew and biscuits. He didn't eat. He sat beside her and told her about the help that they would have been given. The help he'd avoided by going it alone and taking the bribe.

Ruth cried.

While she scraped the plates, he passed only briefly by Danny's room.

"Hi, Pops," Danny said.

"You feeling stronger, boy?"

"Yep! You got the comics?"

"Not tonight. I'll do it tomorrow. Okay?"

"Sure," Danny said, and smiled.

John went to the bedroom and took off his uniform carefully. He put the hanger in the closet and before he turned to the bed, stood staring at it for a long moment. The sounds of a TV set in the next apartment reached him. He listened for a while, and then put the pillow over his head. He fell into an exhausted, troubled sleep.

Chief Hayes was in his office when John arrived the next morning. "Good morning, Cramer," he said.

"I won't take much of your time," John said.

"Time I've got. Sit down. What's on your mind?"

"I'm through. I want to resign."

Chief Hayes leaned back in his chair and nodded thoughtfully. "Better job?"

"No—personal reasons."

"Like?"

John raised his eyes, and this time he did not glance away. "Because I took a bribe."

The Chief tapped a cigarette on the desk before lighting it. "Tell me something I don't know."

"You know already?"

"That's right. I knew it."

"How?"

"Routt. When we picked him up, he asked to see me privately. He threatened to expose it if we didn't give him a break."

"He told."

"Sure. He wanted to save his neck, but he couldn't make it. We had pieced together evidence on

two other robberies. Enough to convict him. I told him if he kept his mouth shut, I'd nail him with just one. If he didn't, he'd get all three and that would mean life before we were finished. He took the easy way. He kept his mouth shut."

"Why didn't you bring charges against me?"

"I couldn't do that. It was my duty to, in a strict sense, but too many people think you're the best cop we've ever had. So I waited you out. I knew yesterday it wouldn't be long."

"And if I hadn't told you?"

Chief Hayes smiled. "You *had* to tell, Cramer. I knew that too. It was just a matter of time. I have your resignation already typed up. I couldn't do otherwise. You can sign it now."

Hayes shoved the paper across the desk and John signed. "I'm sorry, Chief," he said.

"Yes! I know you are."

"I didn't see any way . . ."

"And you were too proud to ask for more help."

"They'd given so much already."

"How do you feel now?"

"I guess you know you don't have to ask that. Better. I'm glad I've made a clean breast of it."

Hayes stood up, folding the resignation carefully.

"I want to tell you, Cramer, before you leave, what a good cop is. He's usually a pretty damned nice guy. He takes all kinds of abuse from big-mouthed characters, and too many times he never gets credit for the help he gives. He's paid to do an important job on a salary that's practically scandalous, it's so

COMPLETE IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE HOMICIDAL VIRGIN

THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVEL

by BRETT HALLIDAY

She wasn't the kind of girl you would meet in a Rogues' Gallery. But her request was so darkly wicked it made Mike doubt the evidence of his ears.

small. But he does his job because he gets a satisfaction when he stops some act of brutality, when he locates a lost child, when he reaches an automobile accident before the ambulances and puts a tourniquet on a torn artery.

"All those things, and a lot more. He's got a revolver on his hip to deal with the kind of people that understand nothing but force. He's the guy that makes the city safe at night. That's part of what a good cop is, but he's something else besides. He's a human being. He usually has a family—most of the time a fairly large one. He can't give them the best car—the split level home. And being human, there are times when this gets tough. Sometimes there is a situation he can't combat and he makes a mistake.

"You made one. A very bad one. The key was you did the wrong thing for the right reason. You were a good cop, Cramer, but you made a tragic mistake. The thing that makes you a very unusual cop is that you couldn't live with it. I'm not sure how many of my men would have come to me and given me the straight truth. But I knew you would from the beginning. You can go now."

John stood and walked to the door.

"What do you plan to do, Cramer?"

"I don't know."

Chief Hayes stubbed his cigarette, and his voice was soft. "There's a letter for you in the dispatcher's desk. They need a good man at the guided missiles plant in Hillsboro. Starting pay is more than here. Might be your reason for leaving. John, if you want it, my letter of recommendation is inside the envelope. I said you were an honest man. You proved that the hard way just now. I'd like to do that much for you. I don't think I'll ever have to regret it."

John Cramer opened the door and hesitated. He did not trust himself to speak. He nodded.

"Good luck, Cramer," Chief Hayes said.

John closed the door. As he went to pick up the envelope, he was hurrying. Ruth was waiting.

THE ONLY MAGAZINE *featuring* MIKE SHAYNE *in every issue*

←Continued From Back Cover

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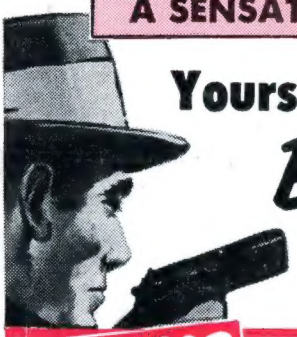

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